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Red Cedar, THE PRAIRIE OUTLAW.

BY GUSTAVE AIMARD.

CHAPTER I. THE VIRGIN FOREST.

IN Mexico the population is only divided into two classes, the upper and the lower. There is no intermediate rank to connect the two extremes, and this is the cause of the two hundred and thirty-nine revolutions which have overthrown this country since the declaration of its independence. Why this is so is simple enough. The intellectual power is in the hands of a small number, and all the revolutions are effected by this turbulent and ambitious minority; whence it results that the country is governed by the most complete military despotism, instead of being a free republic.

The inhabitants of Chihuahua and Texas have retained, even to the present day, that stern, savage, and energetic physiognomy which may be sought in vain among the other States of the Confederation.

Beneath a sky colder than that of Mexico, the winter, which frequently covers the rivers of the region with a thick layer of ice, hardens the muscles of the inhabitants, cleanses their blood, purifies their hearts, and renders them picked men, who are distinguished for their courage, their intelligence, and their profound love of liberty.

The Apaches, who originally inhabited the greater portion of New Mexico, have gradually fallen back before the ax of the pioneers; and after retiring into the immense deserts that cover the triangle formed by the Rio Gila, the Del Norte, and the Colorado, they ravage almost with impunity the Mexican frontiers, plundering, firing, and devastating all they meet with on their passage.

The inhabitants of the countries we alluded to above, held in respect by these ever-shifting savages, are in a state of continual warfare with them, always ready to fight, fortifying their settlements, and only traveling with weapons in their hands.

On a lovely morning in the month of May, which the Indians call "the moon of the flowers," a man of high stature, with harsh and marked features, mounted on a tall, half-tamed steed, started at a canter from the plaza, and after a few minutes of hesitation, employed in realizing his position, resolutely buried his spurs in the horse's flanks, crossed the ford, and after leaving behind him the numerous cottonwood

trees which at this spot cover the river-banks, proceeded toward the dense forest that flashed on the horizon.

This horseman was dressed in the costume generally adopted on the frontiers, and which was so picturesque that we will give a short description of it. The stranger wore a pelisse of green cloth, embroidered with silver, allowing a glimpse of an elegantly-worked shirt, the collar of which was fastened by a loosely-knotted black-silk handkerchief, the ends passed through a diamond ring. He wore green cloth breeches, trimmed with silver, and two rows of buttons of the same metal, and fastened round the hips by a red silken scarf with gold fringe. The

ed with massive silver, wide Moorish silver stirrups, and handsome water bottles at the saddle-bow; while an elegant netting, made of open-work leather, and decorated with small steel chains, entirely covered the horse's croup, and sparkled with its slightest movement.

The stranger appeared, judging from the luxury he displayed, to belong to the high class of society. A sword hung down his right side, two pistols were passed through his girdle, the handle of a long knife protruded from his right boot, and he held a superbly damascened rifle across the saddle in front of him.

Bending over the neck of his galloping steed, he advanced rapidly without looking round him, although the landscape that lay extended before him was one of the most attractive and majestic in those regions.

The river formed the most capricious windings in a center of a terrain diversified in a thousand strange ways. Here and there on the sandy banks enormous trees might be seen lying, which, dried up by the sun, evidenced, in their washed-out appearance, that they had been dead for centuries. Near the shallow and marshy spots, caymans and alligators wandered about awkwardly. At other places, where the river ran almost straight, its banks were uniform, and covered with tall trees, round which creepers had twined, and then struck root in the ground again, thus forming the most inextricable confusion. Here and there small clearings or marshy spots might be detected in the midst of the dense wood, often piled up with trees that had died of old age. Further on, other trees, which seemed still young, judging from their color and the solidity of their bark, fell into dust with the slightest breath of wind.

At times the earth, entirely undermined beneath, drawn down by its own weight, dragged with it the wood which it bore, and produced a crashing, confused sound, which was returned on all sides by the echo, and possessed a certain degree of grandeur in this desert, whose depths no man has yet dared to scrutinize.

Still the stranger galloped on, with his eye ardently fixed before him, and not appearing to see anything. Several hours passed thus: the horseman buried himself deeper in the forest. He had left the banks of the river, and only progressed with extreme difficulty through the entanglement of branches, grass, and shrubs which at every step arrested his movements, and forced him to make innumerable turnings. He merely reined up his horse now and then, took a glance at the sky, and then started again, muttering to himself but one word:

"Adelante!" (Forward!)

At length he stopped in a vast clearing, took a suspicious glance around him, and



RED CEDAR.

breeches, open on the side half way up the thigh, displayed his fine linen drawers beneath: his legs were defended by a strip of brown embossed and stamped leather, attached below the knee by a silver garter. On his heels enormous spurs clanked. A mantle glistening with gold, and drawn up on the shoulder, protected the upper part of his body, while his head was sheltered from the burning sunbeams by a broad-leaved hat of brown stamped felt, the crown of which was contracted by a large silver cord passed twice or thrice around it.

His steed was caparisoned with graceful luxuriousness, which lightened all its beautiful points: a rich saddle of embossed leather, adorn-

probably reassured by the leaden silence which weighed on the desert, he dismounted, hobbled his horse, and took off its bridle that it might browse on the young tree-shoots. This duty accomplished, he carelessly lay down on the ground, rolled a maize cigarette in his fingers, produced a gold match-box from his waist-belt, and struck a light.

The clearing was of considerable extent. On one side the eye could survey with ease, through the trees, the widely-extending prairie, on which deer were browsing with security. On the other side, the forest, wilder than ever, seemed, on the contrary, an impassable wall of verdure. All was abrupt and primitive at this spot, which the foot of man had rarely trodden. Certain trees, either entirely or partially dried up, offered the vigorous remains of a rich and fertile soil; others, equally ancient, were sustained by the twisted creepers, which in the course of time almost equalled their original support in size: the diversity of the leaves produced the strangest possible mixture. Others, containing in their hollow trunk a manure which, formed of their leaves and half-dead branches, had warmed the seeds they had let fall, and offered, in the young shoots they contained, some compensation for the loss of their father tree.

In the prairies, nature, ever provident, seems to have been desirous to shelter from the insults of time certain old trees, patriarchs of the forest which are crushed beneath the weight of ages, by forming them a cloak of grayish moss, which hangs in festoons from the highest branches to the ground, assuming the wildest and most fantastic shapes.

The stranger, lying on his back, with his head resting on his two crossed hands, was smoking with that beatitude, full of ease and sloth, which is peculiar to Southerners. He only interrupted this gentle occupation to roll a fresh cigarette and cast a glance around, while muttering:

"Hum! he keeps me waiting a long time."

He emitted a puff of bluish smoke, and resumed his first position. Several hours passed thus. Suddenly a rather loud rustling was heard in the thicket, some distance behind the stranger.

"Ah, ah!" he said, "I fancy my man is coming at last."

In the mean while the sound became louder, and rapidly approached.

"Hang it, come on," the horseman shouted as he rose. "By our Lady of Pilar! you have surely kept me waiting long enough."

Nothing appeared: the clearing was still deserted, although the sound had attained a certain degree of intensity. The stranger, surprised at the obstinate silence of the man he was addressing, and specially by his continuing not to show himself, at length rose to see for himself the reason. At this moment his horse pricked up its ears, snorted violently, and made a sudden effort to free itself from the lasso that held it; but our new acquaintance rushed toward it and patted it. The horse trembled all over, and made prodigious bounds in order to escape. The stranger, more and more surprised, looked round for an explanation of these extraordinary movements, and was soon satisfied.

Scarce twenty yards from him a magnificent jaguar, with a splendidly spotted hide, was crouched on the main branch of an enormous cypress, and fixed on him two ferocious eyes, as it passed its blood-red, rugged tongue over its lips with a feline pleasure.

"Ah, ah!" the stranger said to himself in a low voice, but displaying no further excitement, "I did not expect you; but no matter, you are welcome, comrade. Humph! we shall have a fight for it."

Without taking his eye off the jaguar, he convinced himself that his sword quitted its scabbard readily, picked up his rifle, and, after these precautions were taken, he advanced resolutely toward the ferocious brute, which saw him coming without changing its position. On arriving within ten yards of the jaguar, the stranger threw away the cigarette he had till now held between his lips, shouldered his rifle, and put his finger on the trigger. The jaguar drew itself together and prepared to leap forward. At the same moment a hoarse yell was heard from the opposite side of the clearing.

"Wait a minute," the stranger said to himself, with a smile; "it seems there are two of them, and I fancied I had to do with a bachelor jaguar. This is beginning to grow interesting."

And he threw a glance on one side. He had not deceived himself: a second jaguar, rather larger than the first, had fixed its flashing eyes upon him.

CHAPTER II.

THE CONTEST.

THE dwellers on the Mexican frontiers are accustomed to fight continually with wild animals, both men and brutes, that continually attack them. Hence the stranger was but slightly affected by the unexpected visit of the two jaguars. Although his position between his two ferocious enemies was somewhat precarious, and he did not at all conceal from himself the danger he ran alone against two, he did not the less resolve to confront them bravely. Not taking his eye off the jaguar he had first seen, he went back a few steps obliquely, so as to have his foes nearly opposite him, instead of standing between them. This maneuver, which demanded some little time, succeeded beyond his hopes. The jaguars watched him, licking their lips, and passing their paws behind their ears with those graceful movements peculiar to the feline race. The two wild beasts, certain of their prey, seemed to be playing with it, and not over eager to pounce on it.

While keeping his eye on the watch, the Mexican did not yield to any treacherous feeling of security: he knew that the struggle he was about to undertake was a supreme one, and he took his precautions. Jaguars never attack a man unless forced by necessity; and the latter tried, before all, to seize the horse. The noble animal, securely fastened by its master, exhausted itself in efforts to break the bonds that held it, and escape. It trembled with terror on scenting its ferocious enemies.

The stranger, when his precautions were completely taken, shouldered his rifle for the second time. At this moment the jaguars raised their heads, while laying back their ears and sniffing anxiously. An almost imperceptible sound was audible in the bushes.

"Who goes there?" the Mexican asked in a loud voice.

"A friend, Don Miguel Zarate," was the reply.

"Ah! it is Valentine," the Mexican continued. "You have arrived just in time to see some fine sport."

"Ah, ah!" the man who had already spoken went on. "Can I help you?"

"It is useless; but make haste if you want to see."

The branches were sharply drawn aside, and two men appeared in the clearing. At the sight of the jaguars they stopped, not through alarm, for they quietly placed the butts of their rifles on the ground, but in order to give the hunter every facility to emerge victorious from his rash combat.

The jaguars seemed to comprehend that the moment for action had arrived. As if by one accord, they drew themselves up and bounded on their enemy. The first, struck in its leap by a bullet which passed through its right eye, rolled on the ground, where it remained motionless. The second was received on the point of the hunter's knife, who, after discharging his rifle, had fallen on his knee, with his left arm folded in his blanket in front, and the knife in the other hand. The man and the tiger writhed together in a deadly embrace, and after a few seconds only one of the adversaries rose: it was the man. The tiger was dead: the hunter's knife, guided by a firm hand, had passed through its heart.

During this rapid fight the new-comers had not made a sign, but remained stoical spectators of all that was taking place. The Mexican rose, thrust his weapon thrice into the grass to clean the blade, and turning coldly to the strangers, said:

"What do you say to that?"

"Splendidly played," the first answered; "it is one of the best double strokes I ever saw in my life."

The two men threw their rifles on their shoulders, and walked up to their friend, who reloaded his piece with as much coolness and tranquillity as if he had not just escaped from a terrible danger by a miracle of skill.

The sun was sinking on the horizon, the shadows of the trees assumed a prodigious length, and the luminary appeared like a ball of fire amid the limpid azure of the heavens. The night would soon arrive, and the desert was awaking. On all sides could be heard, in the gloomy and mysterious depths of the virgin forest, the hoarse howling of the coyotes and other wild beasts, mingled with the song of the birds perched on all the branches. The desert, silent and gloomy during the oppressive heat of day, emerged from its unhealthy torpor on the approach of dark, and was preparing to resume its nocturnal sports.

The three men in the clearing collected dried branches, made a pile of them, and set fire to it. They doubtlessly intended to camp for a portion of the night at this spot. So soon as the flames rose joyously skyward

in long spirals, the two strangers produced from their game-bags maize-cakes, jerked meat, and a gourd of whisky. These various comestibles were complacently spread out on the grass, and the three men began a hunter's meal. When the gourd had gone the round several times, and the food had disappeared, the new-comers lit their Indian pipes, and the Mexican rolled a cigarette.

Although this meal had been short, it lasted, however, long enough for night to have completely set in ere it was ended. Perfect darkness brooded over the clearing, the ruddy reflections of the fire played on the energetic faces of the three men, and gave them a fantastic appearance.

"And now," the Mexican said, after lighting his cigarette, "I will, with your permission, explain to you why I was so anxious to see you."

"One moment," one of the hunters answered. "You know that in the deserts the leaves have often eyes, and the trees ears. If I am not mistaken in your hints, you invited us here that our interview might be secret."

"In truth, I have the greatest interest that nothing of what is said here be overheard, or even suspected."

"Very good. Curumilla, to your work."

The second hunter rose, seized his rifle, and disappeared noiselessly in the gloom. His absence was rather long; but, as long as it lasted, the two men left at the fire did not exchange a syllable. In about half an hour the hunter returned, however, and seated himself by his comrades' side.

"Well?" the one who had sent him off asked him.

"My brothers can speak," he replied, ironically; "the desert is quiet."

On this assurance the three men banished all anxiety. Still prudence did not abandon them: they took up their pipes, and turned their backs to the fire, so that they might watch the neighborhood while conversing.

"We are ready to listen to you," the first hunter said.

"Listen to me with the greatest attention," the Mexican began; "what you are about to hear is of the utmost importance."

The two men bowed silently, and the Mexican prepared to speak again.

Before going further we must introduce to the reader the two men we have just brought on the stage, and go back a few paces in order to make it perfectly understood why Don Miguel Zarate, in lieu of receiving them at his own house, had given them the meeting in the heart of the forest.

The two hunters seemed at the first glance to be Indians; but, on examining them more attentively, you could recognize that one of them belonged to those white trappers whose boldness has become proverbial in the South-west. Their appearance and equipment offered a singular medley of savage and civilized life. Their hair was of a remarkable length; for in those countries, where a man is frequently only sought for the glory of lifting his scalp, it is considered the thing to wear it long and easy to seize.

They had their hair neatly plaited, and intertwined with beaver-skins and bright-colored ribbons. The rest of their garb harmonized with this specimen of their taste. A hunting-shirt of bright red calico fell down to their knees; gaiters decorated with woolen ribbons and bells surrounded their legs; and their feet were shod with moccasins embroidered with beads, which the squaws know so well how to make. A striped blanket, fastened round the hips by a belt of tanned deer-hide, completed their clothing, but was not so closely drawn that at their every movement the butt of the pistols and the hilt of the knives might be seen glistening. As for their rifles, useless at this moment, and carelessly thrown on the ground by their side, if they had been stripped of the plume-worked elk-skin that covered them, it would have been possible to see with what care their owners had decorated them with copper nails painted of various colors; for all about these two men bore the imprint of Indian habits.

The first of the two hunters was a man of thirty-eight at the most, tall, and well built: his muscular limbs denoted great bodily strength, allied to unequalled lightness. Although he affected all the manners of the red-skins, it was an easy matter to perceive that he not only belonged to the unmixed white race, but also to the Norman or Gaulish type. He was fair; his blue eyes had an expression of undefinable sadness; his nose was slightly aquiline; his mouth large, and filled with teeth of dazzling whiteness; a thick chestnut beard covered the lower part of his face, which revealed gentleness, kindness, and courage without boasting, though the whole were combined with a will of iron.

His companion evidently belonged to the Indian race, all the characteristic signs of

which he displayed; but, strange to say, he was not coppery like the American aborigines of Texas and North America; and his skin was brown, and slightly of an olive hue. He had a lofty brow, a bent nose, small but piercing eyes, a large mouth, and square chin; in short, he presented the complete type of the Araucano race, which inhabits a limited territory in the south of Chili. This hunter had round his brow a purple-colored fillet, in which was thrust over the right ear a plume of the Andes eagle, a sign which serves to distinguish the chiefs of the Aucas.

These Indians—above all, in New Mexico—although called *Indios fieles*, are always ready on the first opportunity to ally themselves with their desert congeners; and in the incursions of the Apaches and Comanches it is rare for the faithful Indians not to serve them as scouts, guides, and spies.

CHAPTER III.

THE PECCARIES.

The family of Don Miguel Zarate had retired to New Mexico, which country it did not leave again, a few years after the conquests of the adventurer Cortez. Don Miguel had closely followed the policy of his family by maintaining the bonds of friendship and good neighborhood which, from time immemorial, attached it to the Indians, believers or not. This policy had borne its fruit. Annually, in September, when the terrible red warriors, preceded by murder and arson, rushed like a torrent on the wretched inhabitants, whom they massacred in the farms they plundered, without pity for age or sex, only Don Miguel Zarate's estates were respected; and not merely was no damage inflicted on them, but even if at times a field were unwittingly trampled by the horses' hoofs, or a few trees destroyed by plunderers, the evil was immediately repaired ere the owner had opportunity for complaint.

This conduct of the Indians had not failed to arouse against Don Miguel extreme jealousy on the part of the inhabitants, who saw themselves periodically ruined by the *Indios Bravos*. Earnest complaints had been laid against him before the Mexican Government; but whatever might be the power of his enemies, and the means they employed to ruin him, the rich hacendado had never been seriously disturbed: in the first place, because New Mexico is too remote from the capital for the inhabitants to have any thing to fear from the governing classes; and secondly, Don Miguel was too rich not to render it easy for him to impose silence on those who were most disposed to injure him.

Don Miguel was left a widower after eight years' marriage, with two children, a boy and girl, the son being twenty-four, the daughter seventeen, at the period when our story opens. Donna Clara—such was the daughter's name—was one of the most delicious maidens that can be imagined. Her black eyes, fringed with long silky lashes, pure mouth, and dreamy brow seemed to promise divine joys. Her complexion, slightly bronzed by the warm sunbeams, wore that gilded reflection which so well becomes the women of these intertropical countries. She was short of stature, but exquisitely modeled. Gentle and simple, ignorant as a Creole, this delicious child was adored by her father, who saw in her the wife he had so loved living once more. The Indians looked after her when she at times passed pensively, plucking a flower before their wretched huts, and scarce bending the plants on which she placed her delicate foot. In their hearts they compared this frail maiden, with her soft and vaporous outline, to the "virgin of the first loves," that sublime creation of the Indian religion which holds so great a place in the Aztec mythology.

Don Pablo Zarate, the son, was a powerfully-built man, with harshly-marked features, and a haughty glance, although at times it was imprinted with gentleness and kindness. Endowed with more than ordinary strength, skilled in all bodily exercises, Don Pablo was renowned through the whole country for his talent in taming the most spirited horses, and the correctness of his aim when on the chase. A determined hunter and daring wood-ranger, this young man, when he had a good horse between his legs, and his rifle in his hand, knew none, man or animal, capable of barring his passage. The Indians, in their simple faith, yielded to the son the same respect and veneration they entertained for the father.

The Zarates, then, at the period when our story opens, were real kings of New Mexico. But the felicity they enjoyed was suddenly troubled by one of those vulgar incidents which, though unimportant in themselves, produce a discomfort possessing no apparent cause, from the fact that it is impossible to foresee or prevent them. The circumstance was as follows:

Don Miguel possessed, in the vicinity of the Paso, vast estates extending for a great distance, and consisting principally of haciendas, prairies, and forests. One day he was returning from a visit to his haciendas. It was late, and he pressed on his horse in order to reach ere night the ford, when, at about three or four leagues at the most from the spot to which he was proceeding, and just as he was entering a dense forest of cottonwood trees, through which he must pass ere reaching the ford, his attention was attracted by cries mingled with growls emerging from the wood he was about to enter. He stopped in order to account for the unusual sounds he heard, and bent his head forward to detect what was happening. But it was impossible for him to distinguish any thing through the chaos of creepers and shrubs which intercepted vision. In the meanwhile the noise grew louder, and the shouts were redoubled, and mingled with oaths and passionate exclamations.

His horse laid back its ears, neighed, and refused to advance. Thinking that a man was probably attacked by wild beasts, he only consulted his heart; and, in spite of the visible repugnance of his steed, he compelled it to go forward and enter the wood. He had scarce gone a few yards ere he stopped in amazement at the strange spectacle that presented itself to him.

In the middle of a clearing lay a ripped-up horse, which six or eight peccaries were rending, while a dozen others were attacking with their tusks the stem of an enormous tree, in the topmost branches of which a man had sought shelter.

Let us explain to our readers, who probably know little about them, what sort of animals the peccaries are.

The peccaries hold the intermediate grade between the domestic pig and the wild boar. Although this animal does not exceed two feet in height, and is not more than three feet long from the end of the snout to the beginning of the tail, it is indubitably one of the most dangerous animals in North America. The animal's jaw is provided with tusks rather like those of the boar, but straight and sharp, their length varying between four and six inches. In the shape of the body it resembles a pig, but the bristles scattered over its warty hide are in colored strips: the part nearest the skin is white, and the point of a chocolate tinge. So soon as the animal is enraged these bristles stand out like the quills of a porcupine.

The movements of the peccaries are as quick and sharp as those of a squirrel. They ordinarily live in herds of fifteen, thirty, and even fifty. The strength of the head, neck, and shoulders is so great when they charge, that nothing can resist the impetuosity of their attacks. A remarkable peculiarity of this genus is the clumsy wart they have on their backs, whence a musky fluid evaporates when the animal is in a fury.

The peccary lives in preference on acorns, roots, wheat, sugar-cane, and reptiles of every description. It is a proved fact that the most venomous serpents are devoured by them without their feeling in the slightest degree incommoded.

The mode in which the peccary forms its lair is very singular. This lair is generally in the midst of tufted and impenetrable canes, found in marshy spots round the monarchs of the forest, which still stand like crushed giants, with their grappling lines of creepers and virgin vines. The trunks of these trees, which at times measure forty feet in circumference, are nearly all hollow, and thus afford a convenient shelter for the peccaries, which retire to them every night in herds of twenty to twenty-five, entering the cavity one after the other backward; so that the last has the end of its snout placed just at the entrance of the hole, thus watching, as it were, over the rest of its companions.

The peccaries are unbouderly ferocious: they know not danger, or at least despise it completely. They always attack in herds, and fight with unequalled rage until the last succumb, no matter the nature of their foe. Hence men and animals all fly a meeting with these terrible beasts: the jaguar, so strong and redoubtable, will become their prey if it be so imprudent as to attack them.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SQUATTER.

AFTER what we have said, it is easy to understand how precarious was the position of the man perched on the top of the tree, and surrounded by peccaries. His enemies seemed determined not to leave their ground; they craftily crept round the tree, attacked its base with their tusks, and then recognizing the inutility of their onsets, they quietly lay down by the carcass of the horse, which they had already sacrificed to

their fury. Don Miguel felt moved to pity for the poor fellow, whose position grew momentarily more critical; but in vain did he rack his brains how to help the unhappy man whose destruction was assured.

To attack the peccaries would have been extreme imprudence, and have produced no other result than that of turning on himself the fury of the animals, while not saving the man he wished to help. Still time pressed. What was to be done? How without sacrificing himself, save the man who ran so great a risk?

He hesitated for a long period. It seemed to him impossible to leave, without help, this man whose death was certain. This idea, which presented itself to his mind several times, he had energetically repulsed, so monstrous did it appear to him. At length he resolved at all risks to attempt impossibilities in favor of this stranger, of whose death he would have eventually accused himself had he left him to perish in the desert.

The stranger's position was the more critical because, in his haste to defend himself from the attacks of his enemies, he had let his rifle fall at the foot of the tree, and was consequently unable to reduce the number of the peccaries. In spite of the fineness of their scent, the latter had not noticed Don Miguel's approach, who, by a providential accident, had entered the wood on the side opposite the wind. He dismounted with a sigh, patted his horse, and then took off its accouterments. The noble animal, habituated to its master's caresses, shook its head joyously, and fixed its large intelligent eyes on him. Don Miguel could not repress another sigh: a tear fell down his bronzed cheeks. On the point of accomplishing the sacrifice, he hesitated.

It was a faithful companion, almost a friend, he was about to separate from; but the life of a man was at stake. Driving back the feelings that agitated him, his resolution was formed. He passed a lasso round his horse's neck, and in spite of its obstinate resistance, compelled it to advance to the entrance of the clearing in which the peccaries were assembled. A frail curtain of creepers and leaves alone hid it from their sight. On arriving here he stopped: he had one more moment's hesitation, but only one; for then seizing a bit of tinder, which he lighted, he thrust it into the poor animal's ear while caressing it.

The effect was sudden and terrible. The horse uttered a snort of pain; and rendered mad by the burning, bounded forward into the clearing, striving in vain to get rid of the tinder which caused it intolerable suffering. Don Miguel had smartly leaped aside, and now followed with an anxious glance the result of the terrible tentative he had just made to save the stranger. On seeing the horse appear suddenly in their midst, the peccaries rose, formed a compact group, and rushed with their heads down in pursuit of the horse, thinking no longer of the man. The animal, spurred on still more by the sight of its ferocious enemies, shot ahead with the speed of an arrow, breaking down with its chest all the obstacles in its way, and followed closely by the peccaries.

The man was saved; but at what a price! His owner repressed a last sigh of regret, and leaped into the clearing. The stranger had already descended from the tree; but the emotion he had undergone was so extreme, that he remained seated on the ground, almost in a state of unconsciousness.

"Quick, quick!" Don Miguel said to him sharply. "We have not a moment to lose: the peccaries may alter their minds and return."

"That is true," the stranger muttered in a hollow voice, as he cast a terrified glance around. "Let us be off—off at once."

He made an effort over himself, seized his rifle, and rose. Through a presentiment for which he could not account to himself, Don Miguel experienced at the sight of this man, whom he had hitherto scarce looked at, a feeling of invincible doubt and disgust. Owing to the life he was obliged to lead on these frontiers, frequented by people of every description, the hacendado had been often brought into relation with trappers and hunters whose faces were no recommendation to them; but never had chance brought him in contact with an individual of such sinister appearance as this one.

Still he did not allow his feelings to be seen through, and invited this man to follow him. The latter did not let the invitation be repeated; for he was anxious to escape from the spot where he had been so near death. Thanks to the Mexican's acquaintance with the country, the wood was speedily traversed, and the two men, after a walk of scarce an hour's duration, reached the banks of the Del Norte, just opposite the village. Their speed had been so great,

their anxiety so serious, that they had not exchanged a syllable, so fearful were they of seeing the peccaries appear at any moment. Fortunately this was not the case, and they reached the ford without being again disturbed.

Don Miguel was burdened with his horse's trappings, which he now threw on the ground, and looked around him in the hope of finding some one who would help him in crossing the river. His expectations were not deceived; for just as they reached the ford a muleteer was preparing to cross to the other side of the river with his mules, and offered to carry them both to the town. The two men eagerly accepted, each mounted a mule, and half an hour later they found themselves in safety at the village. After giving the muleteer a few coins to requite him for his services, Don Miguel took up his horse's trappings again, and prepared to start. The stranger stopped.

"We are about to part here," he said in a rough voice; "but, before leaving, let me express to you my deep gratitude for the noble and generous manner in which you saved my life at the peril of your own."

"Sir, I only did my duty in saving you. In the desert all men are brothers, and owe each other protection. Hence do not thank me, I beg, for a very simple action: any other in my place would have acted as I have done."

"Perhaps so," the stranger continued; "but be kind enough, pray, to tell me your name, so that I may know to whom I owe my life."

"That is needless," Don Miguel said with a smile. "Still, as I fancy you are a stranger in these parts, let me give you a piece of advice."

"What is it, sir?"

"Never in future to attack the peccaries. They are terrible enemies, only to be conquered by a strong body of men; and an individual in attacking them commits an unpardonable folly, to which he must fall a victim."

"Be assured, sir, that I shall profit by the lesson I have received this day, and shall never put myself in such a wasp's nest again. I was too near paying dearly for my imprudence. But I beg you, sir, do not let us separate ere I know the name of my preserver."

"As you insist, sir, you shall learn it. I am Don Miguel de Zarate."

The stranger took a peculiar glance at the speaker, while repressing a movement of surprise.

"Ah!" he said in a singular tone, "thanks, Don Miguel Zarate. Without knowing you personally, I was already acquainted with your name."

"That is possible," the hacendero answered; "for I am well known in this country, where my family has been long established."

"I, sir, am the man whom the Indians call Wilchasta Jonté, the Man-eater, and the hunters, my companions, Red Cedar."

And after lifting his hand to his cap in salute, this man threw his rifle on his shoulder, turned on his heel, and went off at full speed. Don Miguel looked after him for a while, and then walked pensively toward the house he inhabited at Paso. The hacendero did not suspect that he had sacrificed his favorite horse to save the life of his most implacable enemy.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOUND.

At sunrise Don Miguel, mounted on an excellent horse, left the Paso, and proceeded toward the estate where he resided with his family. It was situated a few miles from the village, in a delicious position, and was known as the Farm of the Well. The estate inhabited by him stood in the center of the vast delta formed by the Del Norte and the Rio San Pedro, or Devil's River. It was a strong and massive building, supported at regular distances by enormous cross walls of carved stone. Like all the frontier habitations, which are rather fortresses than houses, it was only pierced on the side of the plain with a few narrow windows resembling loopholes, and protected by solid iron bars. This abode was begirt by a thick wall of circumvallation, defended on the top by that fretwork called *almenas*, which indicated the nobility of the owner. Within this wall but separated from the chief apartments, were the stables, outhouses, barns, and cabins for the peons.

At the extremity of the court-yard, in an angle of the hacienda, was the tall square belfry of the chapel, rising above its terraced roof. This chapel was served by a monk called Fray Ambrosio. A magnificent plain closed in this splendid farm. At the end of a valley more than fifty miles in length

were cactus trees of a conical shape, loaded with fruit and flowers, and whose stems were as much as six feet in diameter.

It was one of those superb American mornings during which nature seems to be holding a festival. The *centzonille* (American nightingale) frequently poured forth its harmonious notes; the red-throated cardinals, the blue birds, the parroquets, chattered gayly beneath the foliage; far away on the plain galloped flocks of light antelopes and timid ashatas; while on the extreme verge of the horizon rushed startled droves of wild horses, which raised clouds of impalpable dust beneath the vibration of their rapid hoofs. A few alligators, carelessly stretched out on the river mud, were drying their scales in the sun, and in mid air the grand eagles of the Sierra Madre hovered majestically above the valley.

Don Miguel advanced rapidly at the favorite pace which consists in making the horse raise its front legs, while the hind ones almost graze the ground—a peculiar sort of amble which is very gentle and rapid. The hacendero only employed four hours in traversing the distance separating him from his home, where he arrived about nine in the morning. He was received on the threshold of the house by his daughter, who, warned of his arrival, had hastened to meet him.

He had been absent from home for a fortnight; hence he received his daughter's caresses with the greatest pleasure. When he had embraced her several times, while continuing to hold her tightly clasped in his arms, he regarded her attentively during several seconds.

"What is the matter, Clara?" he asked, with sympathy. "You seem very sad. Can you feel vexed at the sight of me?" he added, with a smile.

"Oh, you can not believe that, father!" she answered, quickly; "for you know how happy your presence must render me."

"Thanks, my child! But whence, in that case, comes the sorrow I see spread over your features?"

The maiden let her eyes sink, but made no reply. Don Miguel threw a searching glance around.

"Where is Don Pablo?" he said. "Why has he not come to greet me? Can he be away from home?"

"No, father, he is here."

"Well, then, what is the reason he is not by your side?"

"Because—" the girl said, with hesitation.

"Well?"

"He is ill."

"My son ill!" Don Miguel exclaimed.

"I am wrong," Clara corrected herself.

"Explain yourself, in heaven's name!"

"My father, the fact is that Pablo is wounded."

"Wounded!" the father sharply said; and thrusting his daughter aside, he rushed toward the house, bounded up the few steps leading to the porch, crossed several rooms without stopping, and reached his son's chamber. The young man was lying, weak and faint, on his bed; but on perceiving his parent he smiled, and held out his hand to him. Don Miguel was fondly attached to his son, his sole heir, and walked up to him.

"What is this wound of which I have heard?" he asked him, in great agitation.

"Less than nothing, father," the young man replied, exchanging a meaning glance with his sister, who entered at the moment. "Clara is a foolish girl, who, in her tenderness, wrongly alarmed you."

"But, after all, you are wounded?" the father continued.

"But I repeat that it is a mere nothing."

"Come, explain yourself. How and when did you receive this wound?"

The young man blushed, and maintained silence.

"I insist on knowing," Don Miguel continued, pressing.

"Good heavens, father!" Don Pablo replied, with an air of ill-humor, "I do not understand why you are alarmed for so futile a cause. I am not a child, whom a scratch should make frightened; and many times have I been wounded previously, and you have not disturbed yourself so much."

"That is possible; but the mode in which you answer me, the care you seem to take to keep me ignorant of the cause of this wound—in a word, every thing tells me that this time you are trying to hide something grave from me."

"You are mistaken, father, and shall convince yourself."

"I wish nothing more: speak. Clara, my child, go and give orders to have breakfast prepared, for I am dying of hunger."

The girl went out.

"Now it is our turn," Don Miguel continued. "In the first place, where are you wounded?"

"Oh! I have merely a slight scratch on my shoulder: if I went to bed it was more

through indolence than any other motive."

"Hum! and what scratched your shoulder?"

"A bullet."

"What! a bullet? Then you must have fought a duel, unhappy boy?" Don Miguel exclaimed, with a shudder.

The young man smiled, pressed his father's hand, and bending toward him, said:

"This is what has happened."

"I am listening to you," Don Miguel replied, making an effort to calm himself.

"Two days after your departure, father, I was superintending, as you wished me to do, the cutting of the cane crop, when a hunter whom you will probably remember having seen prowling about the estate, a man of the name of Andrés Garote, accosted me at the moment I was about to return home after giving my orders to the major-domo. After saluting me obsequiously, according to his wont, the scamp smiled cunningly, and lowering his voice so as not to be overheard by those around us, said, 'Don Pablo, I fancy you would give half an ounce to the man who brought you important news?' 'That depends,' I answered; for, having known the man a long time, I was aware much confidence could not be placed in him. 'Bah! you are so rich,' he continued, insidiously, 'that a miserable sum like that is less than nothing in your pocket, while in mine it would do me a deal of good.'

"Apart from his defects, this scamp had at times done us a few small services; and then, as he said, a half-ounce is but a trifle, so I gave it to him. He stowed it away in his pockets, and then bent down to my ear. 'Thanks,' he said to me. 'I shall not cheat you of your money. Your horse is rested, and can stand a long journey. Proceed to Buffalo Valley, and there you will learn something to interest you.' It was in vain that I urged him to explain himself more clearly; I could draw no more from him. He merely added before parting from me, 'You have good weapons; so take them with you, for no man knoweth what may happen.' Somehow the scamp's valled confidences aroused my curiosity: hence I resolved to go to Buffalo Valley, and gain the clue of this riddle."

"Andrés Garote is a villain, who laid a snare for you, into which you fell," Don Miguel interrupted.

"No, father, you are mistaken. Andrés was honest toward me, and I have only thanks to give him. Still he should have explained himself, perhaps, more distinctly."

The listener shook his head with a doubtful air.

"Go on," he said.

"I entered my house, procured the weapons, and then, mounted on Negro, my black charger, I proceeded toward Buffalo Valley. As you are aware, father, the place we call so, and which belongs to us, is an immense forest of cedars and maples, nearly forty miles in circumference, and traversed almost through its entire length by a wide confluent of the Rio San Pedro."

"Of course I know it, and I intend next year to fell some of the wood there."

"You need not take that trouble," the young man said, with a smile, "for some one else has done it for you."

"What do you mean?" the hacendero asked, wrathfully. "Who has dared?"

"Oh! one of those wretched heretic squatters, as they call themselves. The villain found the spot to suit him, and has quietly settled there with his whelps—three big fellows with hang-dog faces, who laughed at me when I told them that the forest was mine, and answered, while aiming at me, that they were North Americans, who cared as little for me as they did for a coyote; that the ground belonged to the first comer; and that I should afford them lively pleasure by being off at full speed. What more shall I tell you, father? I take after you. I have hot blood, and I cordially hate that race of Yankee pirates, who, for some years back, have settled on our lovely country like a swarm of mosquitoes. I saw our forest plundered, our finest trees cut down. I could not remain unmoved in the presence of these scoundrels' insolence, and the quarrel became so sharp that they fired at me."

"They shall pay dearly for the affront they have offered you, I swear it! I will take an exemplary vengeance," Don Miguel exclaimed, in a fury.

"Why be so angry, father?" the young man replied, visibly annoyed at the effect his story had produced. "The harm these people do us is really very trifling. I was in the wrong to let my passion carry me away."

"On the contrary you were right. I will not have these Northern thieves come and commit their plunder here. I will put a stop to it."

"I assure you that, if you will leave me to act, I feel certain of arranging this affair to your satisfaction."

"I forbid you taking the slightest steps, for this matter concerns me now. Whatever may occur, I do not wish you to interfere. Will you promise me this?"

"As you insist, I do so, father."

"Very good. Get cured as speedily as possible, and keep your mind at rest. The Yankees shall pay me dearly for the blood they have shed."

With these words Don Miguel retired, and his son fell back on his bed stifling a sigh, and uttering a hoarse exclamation of passion.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SQUATTER'S SHANTY.

DON PABLO had not told his father the facts in all their truth or detail. He had fallen into a perfect ambush. He was suddenly attacked by the three brothers, who would have mercilessly killed him, resolved to lay the blame of his death on the wild beasts, had not, at the moment when one of them lifted his knife on the young man, who was thrown down and rendered motionless by the others, a providential succor reached him in the person of a charming maid scarce sixteen years of age.

The courageous girl rushed from a copse with the rapidity of a fawn, and threw herself resolutely into the midst of the assassins.

"What are you about, brothers?" she exclaimed, in a melodious voice. "Why do you wish to kill this stranger?"

The three squatters, surprised by this apparition, which they were far from expecting, fell back a few paces. Don Pablo profited by this truce to jump up and regain possession of his arms, which had fallen by his side.

"Was it not enough," the girl continued, "to rob this man, that you must now try to take his life? Fie, brothers! Do you not know that blood leaves on the hands of him who spills it stains which nothing can efface? Let this man retire in peace."

The young men hesitated. Although unconsciously yielding to their sister's influence, they were ashamed of thus executing her wishes. Still they did not dare express their thoughts, and merely bent on their enemy, who awaited them with a firm foot and pistols in hand, glances laden with hatred and anger.

"Ellen is right," the youngest of her brothers suddenly said. "No, I will not allow any harm to be done the stranger."

The others looked at him savagely.

"You would defend him, if necessary, I suppose, Shaw?" Nathan said to him, ironically.

"Why should I not, were it required?" the young man said, boldly.

"Eh!" Sutter remarked with a grin, "he is thinking of the Wood Eglantine."

This word had been scarce uttered ere Shaw, with purpled face, contracted features, and eyes injected with blood, rushed with uplifted knife on his brother, who awaited him firmly. The girl dashed between them.

"Peace, peace!" she shrieked in a piercing voice. "Do brothers dare threaten one another?"

The two young fellows remained motionless, but watching, and ready to strike in a moment. Don Pablo fixed an ardent glance on the girl, who was really admirable at this moment. With her features animated by anger, her head erect, and her arms stretched out between the two men, she bore a startling likeness to those Druidesses who in olden times summoned the warriors to combat beneath the forests of Germany.

In her whole person she offered the complete type of the gentle Northern woman. Her hair light and golden like ripe corn; her eyes of extreme purity, which reflected the azure of the sky; her earnest mouth, with rosy lips and pearly teeth; her flexible and small waist; the whiteness of her complexion, whose delicate and transparent skin still bore the flush of adolescence—all was combined in this charming maiden to render her the most seductive creature imaginable.

Don Pablo, a stranger to this kind of beauty, felt himself involuntarily attracted toward the girl. Forgetting the reason that had brought him to this spot, the danger he had incurred, and that which still menaced him, he was fascinated and trembling before this delicious apparition, fearing at each instant to see it vanish like a vision, and not daring to turn his glance from her, while he felt he had no strength left to admire her.

This young creature, so frail and delicate, formed a strange contrast with the tall stature and marked features of her brothers,

whose coarse and savage manners only served to heighten the elegance and charm exhaled by her whole person. Still this scene could not be prolonged, and must be ended at once. The maiden walked toward Don Pablo.

"Sir," she said to him with a soft smile, "you have nothing more to fear from my brothers; you can mount your horse again, and set out, and no one will oppose your departure."

The young man understood that he had no pretext to prolong his stay at this spot; he therefore let his head sink, placed his pistols in his holsters, leaped on his horse, and set out with regret, and as slowly as possible.

He had scarce gone a league when he heard the hasty clatter of a horse behind him. He turned back. The approaching horseman was Shaw, who soon caught up to the other. The pair then proceeded some distance side by side without exchanging a syllable, and both seemed plunged in profound thought. On reaching the skirt of the forest, Shaw checked his horse, and softly laid his right hand on the Mexican's bridle. Don Pablo also stopped on this hint, and waited, while fixing an inquiring glance on his strange comrade.

"Stranger," the young man said, "my sister sends me. She implores you, if it be possible, to keep secret what occurred between us to-day. She deeply regrets the attack to which you fell a victim, and the wound you have received; and she will try to persuade Red Cedar, our father, to retire from your estates."

"Thank your sister for me," Don Pablo answered. "Tell her that her slightest wish will be ever a command to me, and that I shall be happy to execute it."

"I will repeat your words to her."

"Thanks. Render me a parting service."

"Speak."

"What is your sister's name?"

"Ellen. She is the guardian angel of our hearth. My name is Shaw."

"I am obliged to you for telling me your name, though I can not guess the reason that induces you to do so."

"I will tell you. I love my sister Ellen before all: she urged me to offer you my friendship. I obey her. Remember, stranger, that Shaw is yours to the death."

"I shall not forget it, though I hope never to be under the necessity of reminding you of your words."

"All the worse," the American said with a shake of his head; "but if at any time the opportunity offers, I will prove to you that I am a man of my word, so surely as I am a Kentuckian."

And hurriedly turning his horse's head, the young man rapidly disappeared in the windings of the forest.

Buffalo Valley, illumined by the parting rays of the setting sun, seemed a lake of verdure to which the golden mists of night imparted magical tones. A light breeze rustled through the lofty crests of the cedars, catalpas, tulip and Peru trees, and agitated the grass. Don Pablo let the reins float idly on his horse's neck, and advanced dreamily through the forest, where the birds were leaping from spray to spray, each saluting in its language the arrival of night.

An hour later the young man reached home; but the wound he had received in his shoulder was more serious than at first supposed. He was obliged, to his great regret, to keep his bed, which prevented him seeking to meet again the maiden whose image was deeply engraven on his heart.

So soon as the owner had gone off, the squatters continued felling trees and sawing planks, and did not abandon this work till the night had grown quite black. Ellen had returned to the interior of the house, where she attended to the housekeeping duties with her mother. This was a wretched hut, hastily made with branches of intertwined trees, which trembled with every breeze, and let the sun and rain penetrate to the interior.

This cabin was divided into three compartments: the one to the right served as the bedroom of the two females, while the men slept in the one to the left. The central compartment, furnished with worm-eaten benches and a clumsily-planed table, was at once keeping-room and kitchen.

It was late: the squatters, assembled round the fire, over which a huge iron pot was boiling, were silently awaiting the return of Red Cedar, who had been absent since the morning. At length a horse's hoofs sounded on the detritus collected for years on the floor of the forest, the noise grew gradually nearer, the horse stopped in front of the hut, and a man made his appearance. It was Red Cedar. The men slowly turned their heads toward him, but did not otherwise disturb themselves, or address a syllable to him.

Ellen alone rose and embraced her father

affectionately. The giant seized the girl in his nervous arms, raised her from the ground, and kissed her several times, saying in his rough voice, which his tenderness sensibly softened:

"Good-evening, my dear."

Then he put her down on the ground again, and not troubling himself further about her, fell heavily on a bench, and thrust his feet toward the fire.

"Come, wife," he said, after the expiration of a moment, "the supper, in the fiend's name! I have a coyote's hunger."

The wife did not let this be repeated. A few moments later a huge dish of fried pork with beans smoked on the table, with large pots of coffee. The meal was short and silent, the four men eating with extreme rapacity. So soon as the beans had disappeared, Red Cedar and his sons lit their pipes and began smoking, though still not speaking. At length Red Cedar took his pipe from his lips, and hit the table sharply, while saying, in a rough voice:

"Come, women, decamp! You have nothing more to do here. You are in our way, so go to the deuce!"

Ellen and her mother immediately went out, and entered their separate apartment. For a few minutes they could be heard moving about, and then all became silent again.

Red Cedar made a sign, and Sutter rose and gently put his ear to the parting board. He listened for a few moments while holding his breath, and then returned to his seat, saying laconically:

"They are asleep."

"Quick, my whelps!" the old squatter said, in a low voice. "We have not a minute to lose; the others are expecting us."

A curious scene then occurred in this mean room, which was nearly illumined by the expiring light of the hearth. The four men rose, opened a large chest, and produced from it various objects of strange shapes—leggings, mittens, buffalo-ropes, collars of grizzly bear claws; in a word, the complete costume of Apache Indians.

The squatters disguised themselves as red-skins; and when they had put on their garments, which rendered it impossible to recognize them, they completed the metamorphosis by painting their faces of different colors.

Assuredly the traveler whom accident had brought at this moment to the hut would have fancied it inhabited by Apaches or Comanches.

The garments which the squatters had taken off were locked up in the chest, of which Red Cedar took the key; and the four men, armed with their American rifles, left the cabin, mounted their horses, which were awaiting them ready saddled, and started at full gallop through the winding forest-paths.

At the moment they disappeared in the gloom Ellen stood in the doorway of the cabin, took a despairing glance in the direction where they had gone, and fell to the ground, murmuring sadly:

"Good Heaven! what diabolical work are they going to perform this night?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE RANGERS.

On the banks of the Rio San Pedro, and on the side of a hill, stood a village composed of some ten cabins, inhabited by a population of sixty persons at the most, including men, women, and children. These people were Coras Indians, hunters and agriculturists, belonging to the Tortoise tribe. These poor Indians lived there on terms of peace with their neighbors, under the protection of the Mexican laws. Quiet and inoffensive beings, during the nearly twenty years they had been established at this place they had never once offered a subject of complaint to their neighbors, who, on the contrary, were glad to see them prosper, owing to their gentle and hospitable manners.

On the night when we saw the squatters leave their cabin in disguise, some twenty individuals, armed to the teeth, and clothed in strange costume, with their faces blackened so as to render them unrecognizable, were bivouacked at about two leagues from the village, in a plain on a river's bank. Seated or lying round huge fires, they were singing, laughing, quarreling, or gambling, with multitudinous yells and oaths. Two men, seated apart at the foot of an enormous cactus, were conversing in a low tone, while smoking their husk cigarettes. These two men, of whom we have already spoken to the reader, were Fray Ambrosio, chaplain to the farm, and Andres Garote, the hunter.

Andres was a tall, thin fellow, with a sickly and cunning face, who draped himself defiantly in his sordid rags, but whose weapons were in a perfectly good condition.

Who were the men causing this disturbance? They were "rangers;" but this requires explanation.

Immediately after each of the different revolutions which have periodically overturned Mexico since that country so pompously declared its independence, the first care of the new President who reaches power is to dismiss the volunteers who had accidentally swollen the ranks of his army, and supplied him the means of overthrowing his predecessor. These sanguinary men, without religion or law, who have no relations or friends, are an utter leprosy to the country.

No longer able to wage war on their countrymen, they form free corps, and engage themselves for a certain salary, to hunt the *Indios Bravos*—that is to say, the Apaches and Comanches—who desolate the Mexican frontiers. In addition to this, the paternal government of North America in Texas, and of Mexico in the States of the Confederation, allots them a certain sum for each Indian scalp they bring in.

The men assembled at this moment on the banks of the river were preparing for a war-party—the name they give to the massacres they organize against the red-skins.

Toward midnight Red Cedar and his three sons reached the rangers' camp. They must have been impatiently expected, for the bandits received them with marks of the greatest joy and the warmest enthusiasm. The dice and cards were immediately deserted. The rangers mounted their horses, and grouped round the squatters, near whom stood Fray Ambrosio and his friend Andres Garote.

Red Cedar took a glance round the mob, and could not repress a smile of pride at the sight of the rich collection of bandits of every description whom he had around him, and who recognized him as chief. He extended his arm to command peace. When all were silent the giant took the word.

"Comrades," he said, in a powerful and marked voice, "the audacity of the red-skins is growing intolerable. If we let them alone they would soon inundate the country, when they would end by expelling us. This state of things must have an end. I have assembled you here for a war-party, which I have been meditating for some time, and shall carry out this night. We are about to attack the Coras, who for some years past have had the impudence to establish themselves near this spot. They are pagans and thieves, who have one hundred times merited the severe chastisement we are about to inflict on them. But I implore you, display no mistaken pity. Crush this race of vipers—let not one escape! The scalp of a child is worth as much as that of a man; so do not let yourselves be moved by cries or tears, but scalp, scalp to the end."

This harangue was greeted by yells of joy.

Red Cedar then whispered a few words in Fray Ambrosio's ears, who bowed his head in assent, and immediately set out in the direction of the Coras villages, followed by Andres Garote. The squatter then turned to the rangers, who were awaiting his orders.

"You know where we are going, men," he said. "Let us start, and before all, be silent, if we wish to catch our game in its lair; for you know that the Indians are as cunning as opossums."

The band started at a gallop, Red Cedar and his sons being at their head. It was one of those calm nights which predispose the soul to reverie, such as America alone has the privilege of possessing. The dark-blue sky was spangled with an infinite number of stars, in the center of which shone the majestic Southern Cross, sparkling like a king's mantle.

The gloomy horsemen still went on, silent and frowning, like the phantoms of the ancient legends, which glide through the shadows to accomplish a deed without a name. At the end of scarce an hour the doomed settlement was reached. All were resting in the village—not a light flashed in a hut. The Indians, wearied with the hard toil of the day, were reposing, full of confidence in the sworn faith, and apprehending no treason.

Red Cedar halted twenty yards away, and drew up his horsemen so as to surround the village on all sides. When each had taken his post, and the torches were lighted, Red Cedar uttered the terrible war-cry of the Apaches, and the rangers galloped at full speed on the village, uttering ferocious howls, and brandishing the torches, which they threw on the cabins.

A scene of carnage then took place which the human pen is powerless to describe. The unhappy Indians, surprised in their sleep, rushed terrified and half-naked out of their poor abodes, and were pitilessly massacred and scalped by the rangers. The village, fired by the rangers' torches, soon be-

came an immense funeral pile, in which victims and murderers were huddled pell-mell.

Still a few Indians had succeeded in collecting. Forming in a compact troop of twenty men, they opposed a desperate resistance to their assassins. At the head of this band was a half-nude, tall Indian of intelligent features, who, with a plowshare, which he wielded with extreme force and skill, felled all the assailants who came within reach of his terrible weapon. This man was the chief of the Coras. At his feet lay his mother, wife, and two children—dead. The unhappy man struggled with the energy of despair. He knew his life would be sacrificed, but he wished to sell it as dearly as possible.

In vain had the rangers fired on the chief—he seemed invulnerable: not one of the bullets had struck him. He still fought, and the weight of his weapon did not seem to fatigue his arm. The rangers excited each other to finish him; but not one dared to approach him.

But this combat of giants could not endure longer. Of the twenty companions he had round him on commencing the struggle the chief now only saw two or three upright: the rest were dead. There must be an end. The circle that inclosed the hapless Indian drew closer and closer. Henceforth it was only a question of time with him. The rangers, recognizing the impossibility of conquering this lion-hearted man, had changed their tactics: they no longer attacked him, but contented themselves with forming an impassable circle round him, waiting prudently for the moment when the strength of the prey, which could not escape them, was exhausted, in order to rush upon him.

The Coras understood the intention of his enemies. A contemptuous smile contracted his haughty lips, and he rushed resolutely toward these men who recoiled before him. Suddenly, with a movement quicker than thought, he threw with extraordinary strength the plowshare among the rangers, and bounding like a panther, leaped on a horse, and clutched its rider with superhuman vigor.

Ere the rangers had recovered from the surprise this unforeseen attack occasioned in them, by a desperate effort, and still holding the horseman, the chieftain drew from his girdle a short, sharp knife, which he buried up to the hilt in the flanks of the horse. The animal uttered a shriek of pain, rushed headlong into the crowd, and bore both away with maddening speed.

The rangers, rendered furious at being played with by a single man, and seeing their most terrible enemy escape them, started in pursuit; but with his liberty the Coras had regained all his energy: he felt himself saved. In spite of the desperate efforts the rangers made to catch him up, he disappeared in the darkness.

The chief continued to fly till he felt the horse tottering under him. He had not loosed his hold of the horseman, who was half strangled by the rude embrace, and both rolled on the ground. This man wore the costume of the Apache Indians. The Coras regarded him for an instant attentively, and then a smile of contempt played round his lips.

"You are not a red-skin," he said in a hollow voice; "you are only a pale-face dog. Why put on the skin of the lion when you are a cowardly coyote?"

The ranger, still stunned by the fall he had suffered, and the hug he had endured, did not reply.

"I could kill you," the Indian continued; "but my vengeance would not be complete. You and yours must pay me for all the innocent blood you have shed like cowards this night. I will mark you, so that I may know you again."

Then, with fearful coolness, the Coras threw the ranger on his back, put his knee on his chest, and burying his finger in the socket of his eye, gave it a sharp rotatory movement, and plucked out his eye-ball. On this frightful mutilation the wretch uttered a cry of pain impossible to describe. The Indian got up.

"Go!" he said to him. "Now I am certain of finding you whenever I want you."

At this moment the sound of hoofs could be heard a short distance off: the rangers had evidently heard their comrade's cry, and were hurrying to his aid. The Coras rushed into the bushes and disappeared. A few moments later the rangers came up.

"Nathan, my son!" Red Cedar shouted, as he leaped from his horse and threw himself on the body of the wounded. "Nathan, my first-born, is dead!"

"No," one of the rangers answered; "but he is very bad."

It was really the squatter's eldest son whom the chief had mutilated. Red Cedar seized him in his arms, placed him before

him on the saddle, and the band started again at a gallop. The rangers had accomplished their task: they had sixty human scalps hanging from their girdles. The village of the Coras was no longer aught save a pile of ashes.

Of all the inhabitants only the chief survived; but he would suffice to avenge his brothers.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VALLEY OF THE BUFFALO.

DON MIGUEL ZARATE, on leaving his son, remounted his horse and rode straight to Paso, to the house of Don Luciano Perez, the police magistrate.

The worthy Don Luciano shuddered on hearing the details of what had occurred between Don Pablo and the squatters. He at once buckled on his sword, gave orders to ten well-armed men to mount, and placing himself at the head of this numerous escort, he proceeded toward Buffalo Valley.

Don Miguel had witnessed with secret annoyance all these formidable preparations. He placed but slight confidence in the courage of the policemen, and he would have preferred the sheriff leaving him master to act as he pleased.

Don Luciano Perez was a plump little man of about sixty years of age, round as a tub, with a jolly face, adorned with a rubicund nose and two cunning little eyes. The little band set out at a canter, and proceeded rapidly toward the forest. The sheriff hurled fire and flames at the audacious usurpers, as he called them: he spoke of nothing less than killing them without mercy, if they attempted even the slightest resistance to the orders he was about to give them. Don Miguel, who was much calmer, and foreboded no good from this great wrath, sought in vain to pacify him by telling him that he would in all probability have to do with men difficult to intimidate, against whom coolness would be the best weapon.

Don Miguel, in order to shorten the journey, led the band by a cross-road, which saved at least one-third the distance; and the first trees of the forest already appeared about two miles off. The mischief produced by the squatters was much more considerable than Don Pablo had represented to his father; and, at the first glance, it seemed impossible that, in so short a time, four men, even though working vigorously, could have accomplished it. The finest trees lay on the ground: enormous piles of planks were arranged at regular distances, and on the river an already completed raft only awaited a few more stems of trees to be thrust into the water.

Don Miguel could not refrain from sighing at the sight of the devastation committed in one of his best forests; but the nearer they approached the spot where they expected to meet the squatters, the more lukewarm grew the warlike zeal of the sheriff and his aids, and Don Miguel soon found himself compelled to urge them on, instead of restraining them as he had hitherto done. Suddenly the sound of an ax echoed a few paces ahead of the band. The sheriff, impelled by the feeling of his duty, and shame of appearing frightened, advanced boldly in the direction of the sound, followed by his escort.

"Stop!" a rough voice shouted, at the moment the policemen turned the corner of a lane.

Ten paces from them stood a man in the center of the ride, leaning on an American rifle. The sheriff turned to Don Miguel with such an expression of hesitation and honest terror that he could not refrain from laughing.

"Come, courage, Don Luciano!" he said to him. "This man is alone: he can not venture to bar our passage."

"Forward!" the sheriff exclaimed, ashamed of this impression which he could not master, and frowning portentously, "forward, you fellows, and fire on that scoundrel if he make but a sign to resist you."

The men set out again with prudential hesitation.

"Stop! I tell you again," the squatter repeated. "Did you not hear the order I gave you?"

The sheriff, reassured by the presence of the proprietor, then advanced, and said with a tone which he strove to render terrible, but which was only ridiculous through the terror he revealed:

"I, Don Luciano Perez, of the town of Paso, have come, by virtue of the powers delegated to me by the Government, to summon you and your adherents to quit within twenty-four hours this forest you have illegally entered, and which—"

"Ta, ta!" the stranger shouted, rudely interrupting him, and stamping his foot

savagely. "I care as much for all your words and laws as I do for an old moccasin. The ground belongs to the first comers. We are comfortable here, and mean to remain."

"Your language is very bold, young man," Don Miguel then said. "You do not consider that you are alone, and that, failing other rights, we have strength on our side."

The squatter burst into a laugh. "You believe that," he said. "Learn, stranger, that I care as little for the ten numbugs I now have before me as I do for a woodcock, and that they will do well to leave me at peace, unless they want to learn the weight of my arm at their expense. However, here is my father: settle it with him."

And he began carelessly whistling "Yankee Doodle." At the same instant three men, at the head of whom was Red Cedar, appeared on the path. At the sight of these unexpected reinforcements for their arrogant enemy, the sheriff made a movement in retreat. The affair was becoming complicated, and threatened to assume proportions very grave for them.

"Hallo! what's up?" the old man asked, roughly. "Any thing wrong, Sutter?"

"These people," the young man answered, shrugging his shoulders, contemptuously, "are talking about driving us from the forest by virtue of some order."

"Hallo!" Red Cedar said, his eyes flashing as he cast a savage glance at the Mexicans. "The only law I recognize in the desert," he continued, with a gesture of terrible energy, as he struck his rifle-barrel, "is this. Withdraw, strangers, if you do not wish blood to be shed between us. I am a peaceful man, wishing to do no one a hurt; but I warn you that I will not allow myself to be kicked out without striking a blow."

"You will not be turned out," the sheriff remarked, timidly; "on the contrary, you have seized on what belongs to other people."

"I won't listen to your arguments, which I do not understand," the squatter roughly exclaimed. "God gave the ground to man that he might labor on it. Every proprietor who does not fulfill this condition tacitly renounces his rights, and the earth then becomes the property of the man who tills it with the sweat of his brow. Be off at full speed, if you do not wish harm to happen to you!"

"We will not suffer ourselves to be intimidated by your threats," the sheriff said, impelled by his anger, and forgetting for a moment his alarm; "we will do our duty, whatever may happen."

"Try it," Red Cedar said, with a grin. And he made a sign to his sons. The latter arranged themselves in a single line, and occupied the entire width of the path.

"In the name of the law," the sheriff said, with energy, as he pointed out the old man, "men seize that person."

But, as so frequently happens under similar circumstances, this order was more easy to give than to execute. Red Cedar and his sons did not appear at all disposed to let themselves be collared.

"For the last time, will you be off?" the squatter shouted. "Let them have it."

His three sons raised their rifles. At this movement, which removed all doubts that might still remain on their minds, and which proved to them that the squatters would not hesitate to proceed to extremities, the sheriff and his aids were seized with an invincible terror. They turned back and galloped off at full speed, followed by the yells of the squatters.

One man alone remained motionless before them—Don Miguel Zarate. Red Cedar had not recognized him, either owing to the distance that separated them, or because the proprietor had purposely pulled over his eyes his broad-brimmed hat. Don Miguel dismounted, placed the pistols from his holsters through his belt, fastened his horse to a tree, and coolly throwing his rifle across his shoulders, boldly advanced toward the squatters. The latter, surprised by the courage of this man, who alone attempted what his comrades had given up all hopes of achieving, let him come up to them without offering the slightest opposition. When a couple of paces from the old squatter, he stopped, put the butt of his rifle on the ground, and removing his hat, said:

"Do you recognize me, Red Cedar?"

"Don Miguel Zarate!" the bandit shouted, in surprise. "As the sheriff deserts me," the proprietor continued, "and fled like a coward before your threats, I am obliged to take justice for myself, and I will do so! Red Cedar, I, as owner of this forest, in which you have settled without permission, order you to depart at once."

The young men exchanged a few muttered threats.

"Silence!" Red Cedar commanded. "Let the man speak."

"I have finished, and await your answer." The squatter appeared to reflect deeply for a few minutes.

"The answer you demand is difficult to give," he at length said: "my position toward you is not a free one."

"Why so?"

"Because I owe you my life."

"I dispense you from all gratitude."

"That is possible. You are at liberty to do so; but I can not forget the service you rendered me."

"It is of little consequence."

"Much more than you fancy. I may be, through my character, habits, and mode of life I lead, beyond the law of civilized beings; but I am not the less a man, and if of the worst sort, perhaps, I do no more forget a kindness than I do an insult."

"Prove it, then, by going away as quickly as you can, and then we shall be quits."

The squatter shook his head.

"Listen to me, Don Miguel," he said.

"You have in this country the reputation of being the providence of the unfortunate. I know from myself the extent of your kindness and courage. It is said that you possess an immense fortune, of which you do not yourself know the extent."

"Well, what then?" the hacendero impatiently interrupted him.

"The damage I can commit here, even if I cut down all the trees in the forest, would be but a trifle to you: then whence comes the fury you display to drive me out?"

"Your question is just, and I will answer it. I demand your departure from my estates because, only a few days back, my son was grievously wounded by your lads, who led him into a cowardly snare; and if he escaped death, it was only through a miracle. That is the reason why we can not live side by side, for blood severs us."

Red Cedar frowned.

"Is this true?" he said, addressing his sons.

The young men only hung their heads in reply.

"I am waiting," Don Miguel went on.

"Come, the question can not be settled thus, so we will proceed to my cabin."

"For what purpose? I ask you for a yes or a no."

"I can not answer you yet. We must have a conversation together, after which you shall decide as to my future conduct. Follow me, then, without fear."

"I fear nothing, as I believe I have proved to you. Go on, as you demand it; I will follow you."

Red Cedar made his sons a sign to remain where they were, and proceeded with long strides toward his hut, which was but a short distance off. Don Miguel walked carelessly after him. They entered the cabin. It was deserted. The two females were doubtless also occupied in the forest. Red Cedar closed the door after him, sat down on a bench, made his guest a sign to do the same, and began speaking in a low and measured voice, as if afraid what he had to say might be heard outside.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ASSASSINATION.

"LISTEN to me, Don Miguel," Red Cedar said, "and pray do not mistake my meaning. I have not the slightest intention of intimidating you, nor do I think of attempting to gain your confidence by revelations which you may fairly assume I have accidentally acquired."

The proprietor regarded with amazement the speaker, whose tone and manner had so suddenly changed.

"I do not understand you," he said to him. "Explain yourself more clearly, for the words you have just uttered are an enigma, the key to which I seek in vain."

"You shall be satisfied; and if you do not catch the meaning of my words this time it must be because you will not. Like all intelligent men, you are wearied of the incessant struggles in which the vital strength of your country is exhausted unprofitably. You have seen that a land so rich, so fertile, so gloriously endowed as Mexico, could not—I should say ought not—to remain longer the plaything of paltry ambitions, and the arena on which all these transitory tyrannies sport in turn. For nearly thirty years you have dreamed of emancipation, not of your entire country, for that would be too rude a task, and unrealizable; but you said to yourself, 'Let us render New Mexico independent; form it into a new State, governed by wise laws rigorously executed. By liberal institutions let us give an impetus to all the riches with which it is

choked, give intellect all the liberty it requires, and perhaps within a few years the entire Mexican Confederation, amazed by the magnificent results I shall obtain, will follow my example. Then I shall die happy at what I have effected—my object will be carried out. I shall have saved my country from the abyss over which it hangs, through the double pressure of the American Union and the exhaustion of the Spanish race.' Are not those ideas yours, caballero? Do you consider that I have explained myself clearly this time?"

"Perhaps so, though I do not yet see distinctly the point you wish to reach. The thoughts you attribute to me are such as naturally occur to all men who sincerely love their country, and I will not pretend that I have not entertained them."

"You would be wrong in doing so, for they are great and noble, and breathe the purest patriotism."

"A truce to compliments, and let us come to the point, for time presses."

"Patience: I have not yet ended. These ideas must occur to you sooner than to another, as you are the descendant of the first Aztec kings, and born defender of the Indians in this hapless country. You see that I am well acquainted with you, Don Miguel Zarate."

"Too well, perhaps," the Mexican muttered.

The squatter smiled and went on:

"It is not chance that led me to this country. I knew what I was doing, and why I came. Don Miguel, the hour is a solemn one. All your preparations are made: will you hesitate to give New Mexico the signal which must render it independent of the metropolis which has so long been fattening at its expense? Answer me."

Don Miguel started. He fixed on the squatter a burning glance, in which admiration at the man's language could be read. Red Cedar shrugged his shoulders.

"What! do you still doubt?" he said.

He rose, went to a box from which he took some papers, and threw them on the table before the hacendero, saying:

"Read."

Don Miguel hurriedly seized the papers, and ran his eye over them.

"Well?" he asked, looking fixedly at the strange speaker.

"You see," the squatter answered, "that I am your accomplice. General Ibanez, your agent in Mexico, is in correspondence with me, as is Mr. Wood, your agent at New York."

"It is true," the Mexican said coldly, "you have the secret of the conspiracy. The only point left is to what extent that goes."

"I possess it entirely. I have orders to enlist the volunteers who will form the nucleus of the insurrectionary army."

"Good!"

"Now, you see, by these letters of General Ibanez and Mr. Wood, that I am commissioned by them to come to an understanding with you, and receive your final orders."

"I see it."

"What do you purpose doing?"

"Nothing."

"What, nothing!" the squatter exclaimed, bounding with surprise. "You are jesting I suppose."

"Listen to me in your turn, and pay attention to my words, for they express my irrevocable resolution. I know not, nor care to know, by what means, more or less honorable, you have succeeded in gaining the confidence of my partners, and becoming master of our secrets. Still it is my firm conviction that a cause which employs such men as yourself is compromised, hence I renounce every combination in which you are called to play a part. Your antecedents and the life you lead, have placed you without the pale of the law."

"I am a bandit—out with it! But what matter so long as you succeed? Does not the end justify the means?"

"That may be your morality, but it will never be mine. I repudiate all community of ideas with men of your stamp. I will not have you either as accomplice or partner."

The squatter darted a look at him laden with hatred and disappointment.

"In serving us," Don Miguel continued, "you can only have an interested object, which I will not take the trouble of guessing at. An Anglo-American will never frankly aid a Mexican to conquer his liberty: he would lose too much by doing it."

"Then?"

"I renounce forever the projects I had formed. I had, I grant, dreamed of restoring to my country the independence of which it was unjustly stripped: but it shall remain a dream."

"That is your last word?"

"The last."

"You refuse?"

"I do."
"Good; then I know now what is left me to do."
"I am curious to learn it."

"However rich you may be, Don Miguel Zarate, and perhaps because of those very riches, and in spite of the kindness you sow broadcast, the number of your enemies is very considerable."

"I know it."
"Very good. Those enemies will joyfully seize the first opportunity that presents itself to destroy you."

"It is probable."
"You see, then. When I go to the Governor and tell him that you are conspiring, and, in support of my denunciation, hand him not only these letters, but several others written and signed by you, lying in that chest, do you believe that the Governor will treat me as an impostor, and refuse to arrest you?"

"Then you have letters in my handwriting?"
"I have three, which will be enough to have you shot."

"Ah!"
"Yes. Hang it all! you understand that, in an affair so important as this, it is wise to take one's precautions, for no one knows what may happen; and men of my stamp," he added with an ironical smile, "have more reasons than others for being prudent."

"Come, that is well played," the other said, carelessly.

"Is it not?"
"Yes, and I compliment you on it: you are a better player than I gave you credit for."

"Oh! you do not know me yet."
"The little I do know suffices me."

"Then?"
"We will remain as we are, if you will permit me."

"You still refuse?"
"More than ever."
The squatter frowned.

"Take care, sir," he muttered, hoarsely.

"I will do what I told you."

"Yes, if I allow you the time."

"Eh?"
"If you are a clever scamp, I am not altogether a fool. Do you believe, in your turn, that I will let myself be intimidated by your threats, and that I should not find means to keep you from acting?"

"I am curious to know the means you will employ to obtain this result."

"You shall see," Don Miguel replied, with perfect coolness.

The two men were seated in front of the hearth, each at the end of a bench: the table was between them, but a little back, so that while talking they only leaned an elbow on it. While uttering the last word Don Miguel bounded like a tiger on the squatter, who did not at all expect the attack, seized him by the throat, and hurled him to the ground. The two enemies rolled on the uneven flooring of the cabin.

The attack had been so sudden and well-directed that the half-strangled squatter, in spite of his Herculean strength, could not free himself from his enemy's iron clutch, which pressed his throat like a vice. Red Cedar could neither utter a cry nor offer the slightest resistance: the Mexican's knee crushed his chest, while his fingers pressed into his throat.

So soon as he had reduced the wretch to utter impotence, Don Miguel drew from his boot a long sharp knife, and buried the entire blade in his body. The bandit writhed convulsively for a few seconds; a livid pallor suffused his face; his eyes closed, and he then remained motionless. Don Miguel left the weapon in the wound, and slowly rose.

"Ah, ah!" he muttered, as he gazed at him with a sardonic air, "I fancy that rogue will not denounce me now."

Without loss of time he seized the letters lying on the table, took from the box the few documents he found in it, hid them all in his bosom, opened the door of the cabin, which he carefully closed after him, and went off with long strides.

The squatter's sons had not quitted their post: but soon as they perceived the Mexican, they went up to him.

"Well," Shaw asked him, "have you come to an understanding with the old man?"

"Perfectly so," was the laconic answer.

"Then the affair is settled?"

"Yes, to our mutual satisfaction."

"All the better," the young men exclaimed, joyously.

The proprietor unfastened his horse and mounted.

"Good-by, gentlemen!" he said to them.

"Good-by!" they replied, returning his bow.

He put his horse to a trot, but at the first turn in the road he dug his spurs into its flanks, and started at full speed.

"Now," Sutter observed, "I believe that

we can proceed to the cabin without inconvenience."

And they walked toward the cabin, pleasantly conversing together.

Don Miguel, however, had not succeeded so fully as he imagined. Red Cedar was not dead, for the old bandit kept a firm hold on life. Attacked unawares, the squatter had not attempted a resistance, which he saw at the first glance was useless, and would only have exasperated his adversary. But with marvelous sagacity, he stiffened himself against the pain, and resolved on "playing possum." The success of his stratagem was complete.

So long as his enemy remained in the hut the squatter was careful not to make the slightest movement that might have betrayed him; but, so soon as he was alone, he opened his eyes, rose with an effort, drew the dagger from the wound, and looking at the door through which the Mexican had departed with a glance so full of hatred that it is impossible to describe, he muttered:

"Now we are quits, Don Miguel Zarate, since you have tried to take back the life of him you saved. Pray God never to bring us face to face again!"

He uttered a deep sigh, and rolled heavily on the ground in a fainting-fit. At this moment his sons entered the cabin.

CHAPTER X.

THE SACHEM OF THE CORAS.

A FEW days after the events we have described in the previous chapter there was one of those lovely mornings which are not accorded to our cold climates to know. The sun poured down in profusion its warm beams, which caused the pebbles and sand to glisten in the walks of the garden of the Farm. In a clump of flowering orange and lemon trees, whose sweet exhalations perfumed the air, and beneath a copse of cactus, nopals, and aloes, a maiden was asleep, carelessly reclining in a hammock, which hung between two orange trees.

With her head thrown back, her long black hair unfastened, and falling in disorder on her neck and bosom; with her coral lips slightly parted, and displaying the dazzling pearl of her teeth, Clara (for it was she who slept thus with an infantile slumber) was really charming. Her features breathed happiness, for not a cloud had yet arisen to perturb the azure horizon of her calm and tranquil life.

It was nearly midday; there was not a breath in the air. The sunbeams, pouring down vertically, rendered the heat stifling and unsupportable, that every one in the house had yielded to sleep, and was enjoying what is generally called in hot countries the *siesta*. Still, at a short distance from the spot where Clara reposed, calm and smiling, a sound of footsteps, at first almost imperceptible but gradually heightening, was heard, and a man made his appearance. It was Shaw, the youngest of the squatter's sons. How was he at this spot?

The young man was panting, and the perspiration poured down his cheeks. On reaching the entrance of the clump he bent an anxious glance on the hammock.

"She is there," he murmured with a passionate accent. "She sleeps."

Then he fell on his knees upon the sand, and began admiring the maiden, dumb and trembling. He remained thus a long time, with his glance fixed on the slumberer with a strange expression. At length he uttered a sigh and tearing himself with an effort from this delicious contemplation, he rose sadly, muttering in a whisper:

"I must go—if she were to awake—oh, she will never know how much I love her!"

He plucked an orange-flower, and softly laid it on the maiden; then he walked a few steps from her, but almost immediately returning, he seized, with a nervous hand, Clara's veil, which hung down from the hammock, and pressed it to his lips several times, saying, in a voice broken by the emotion he felt:

"It has touched her hair."

And rushing from the thicket, he crossed the garden and disappeared. He had heard footsteps approaching. In fact, a few seconds after his departure, Don Miguel, in his turn, entered the copse.

"Come, come," he said gayly, as he shook the hammock, "sleeper, will you not have finished your siesta soon?"

Clara opened her eyes with a smile.

"I am no longer asleep, father," she said.

"Very good. That is the answer I like." And he stepped forward to kiss her; but, with a sudden movement, the maiden drew herself back as if she had seen some fearful vision, and her face was covered with a livid pallor.

"What is the matter with you?" the father exclaimed with terror.

The girl showed him the orange-flower. "Well," her father continued, "what is there so terrific in that flower? It must have fallen from the tree during your sleep."

Clara shook her head sadly. "No," she said; "for some days past I have always noticed, on waking, a similar flower thrown on me."

"You are absurd: chance alone is to blame for it all. Come, think no more about it: you are as pale as death, child. Why frighten yourself thus about a trifle? Besides, the remedy may be easily found. As you are so afraid of flowers now, why not take your siesta in your bedroom, instead of burying yourself in this thicket?"

"That is true, father," the girl said, all joyous, and no longer thinking of the fear she had undergone. "I will follow your advice."

"Come, that is settled, so say no more about it. Now give me a kiss."

The maiden threw herself in her father's arms, whom she stifled with kisses. Both sat down on a grassy mound, and commenced one of those delicious chit-chats whose charm only those who are parents can properly appreciate. Presently a peon came up.

"What has brought you?" Don Miguel asked.

"Excellency," the peon answered, "a red-skin warrior has just arrived, who desires speech with you."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, excellency; it is Eagle-wing, the sachim of the Coras."

"Eagle-wing!" the proprietor repeated with surprise. "What can have brought him to me? Lead him here."

The peon retired, and in a few minutes returned, preceding Eagle-wing.

The chief had donned the great war-dress of the sachems of his nation. His hair, plaited with the skin of a rattlesnake, was drawn up on the top of his head: in the center an eagle-plume was affixed. A blouse of striped calico, adorned with a profusion of bells, descended to his thighs, which were defended from the stings of musketoes by drawers of the same stuff. He wore moccasins made of peccary skin, adorned with glass beads and porcupine-quills. To his heels were fastened several wolves' tails, the distinguishing mark of renowned warriors. Round his loins was a belt of elk-hide, through which were passed his knife, his pipe, and his medicine-bag. His neck was adorned by a collar of grizzly bear-claws and buffalo-teeth. Finally, a magnificent robe of a white female buffalo-hide, painted red inside, was fastened to his shoulders, and fell down behind him like a cloak. In his right hand he held a fan formed of a single eagle's-wing, and in his left hand an American rifle. There was something imposing and singularly martial in the appearance and demeanor of this savage child of the forest.

On entering the thicket he bowed gracefully to Clara, and then stood motionless and dumb before Don Miguel. The Mexican regarded him attentively, and saw an expression of gloomy melancholy spread over the Indian chief's features.

"My brother is welcome," he said to him. "To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing him?"

The chief cast a side glance at the maiden. Don Miguel understood what he desired, and made Clara a sign to withdraw. They remained alone.

"My brother can speak," the proprietor then said; "the ears of a friend are open."

"Yes, my father is good," the chief replied, in his guttural voice. "He loves the Indians: unhappily all the pale-faces do not resemble him."

"What does my brother mean? Has he cause to complain of any one?"

The Indian smiled sadly.

"Where is there justice for the red-skins?" he said. "The Indians are animals: the Great Spirit has not given them a soul, as he has done to the pale-faces, and it is not a crime to kill them."

"Come, chief, pray do not speak longer in riddles, but explain why you have quitted your tribe?"

"Mookapee is alone: his tribe no longer exists."

"How?"

"The pale-faces came in the night, like jaguars without courage. They burned the village, and massacred all the inhabitants, even to the women and little children."

"Oh, that is frightful!" his listener murmured, in horror.

"Ah!" the chief continued, with an accent full of irony, "the scalps of the red-skins are sold dearly."

"And do you know the men who committed this atrocious crime?"

"Mookapec knows them, and will avenge himself."

"Tell me their chief, if you know his name."

"I know it. The pale-faces call him Red-Cedar, the Indians the Man-eater."

"Oh! as for him, chief, you are avenged, for he is dead."

"My father is mistaken."

"How so? Why, I killed him myself."

The Indian shook his head.

"Red Cedar has a hard life," he said: "the blade of the knife my father used was too short. Red Cedar is wounded, but in a few days he will be about again, ready to kill and scalp the Indians."

This news startled the haciennero: the enemy he fancied he had got rid of still lived, and he would have to begin a fresh struggle.

"My father must take care," the chief continued. "Red Cedar has sworn to be avenged."

"Oh! I will not leave him the time. This man is a demon, of whom the earth must be purged at all hazards, before his strength has returned, and he begins his assassinations again."

"I will aid my father in his vengeance."

"Thanks, chief. I do not refuse your offer: perhaps I shall soon need the help of my friends. And now, what do you propose doing?"

"Eagle-wing will retire to the desert. He has friends among the Comanches. They are red-skins, and will welcome him gladly."

"I will not strive to combat your determination, chief, for it is just; and if, at a later date, you take terrible reprisals on the white men, they will have no cause of complaint, for they have brought it on themselves. When does my brother start?"

"At sunset."

"Rest here to-day: to-morrow will be soon enough to set out."

"Mookapec must depart this day."

"Act as you think proper. Have you a horse?"

"No; but at the first drove I come to I will lasso one."

"I do not wish you to set out thus, but will give you a horse."

"Thanks; my father is good. The Indian chief will remember—"

"Come, you shall choose for yourself."

"I have still a few words to say to my father."

"Speak, chief; I am listening to you."

"Koutonepi, the pale hunter, begged me to give my father an important warning."

"What is it?"

"A great danger threatens my father. Koutonepi wishes to see him as soon as possible, in order himself to tell him its nature."

"Good! My brother will tell the hunter that I shall be to-morrow at the 'clearing of the shattered oak,' and await him there till night."

"I will repeat my father's words to the hunter."

The two men then quitted the garden, and hurriedly proceeded toward the stables. Don Miguel let the chief choose his own horse, and while the sachem was harnessing his steed in the Indian fashion, he withdrew to his bedroom, and sent for his son to join him. The young man had perfectly recovered from his wound. His father told him that he was obliged to absent himself for some days: he intrusted to him the management of the estate, while recommending him on no consideration to leave the farm, and to watch attentively over his sister. The young man promised him all he wished, happy at enjoying perfect liberty for a few days.

After embracing his son and daughter, Don Miguel proceeded to the yard, where, in the meanwhile, the chief had been amusing himself by making the magnificent horse he had chosen curvet. He admired for several moments the Indian's skill and grace, for he managed a horse superbly; then mounted, and the two men proceeded together toward the Paso del Norte, which they must cross in order to enter the desert, and reach the clearing of the shattered oak.

The journey passed in silence, for the two men were deeply reflecting. At the moment they entered the town the sun was setting on the horizon in a bed of red mist, which foreboded a storm for the night. At the entrance of the village they separated; and on the morrow, as we have seen in our first chapter, Don Miguel set out at day-break, and galloped to the clearing.

CHAPTER XI.

CONVERSATION.

VALENTINE GUILLOIS had traversed the vast solitudes of Mexico and Texas during the past five or six years. We saw him just now accompanied by the Araucano chief. These two men were the boldest hunters on the frontier. At times, when they had collected an ample harvest of furs, they went to sell them in the villages, renewed their stock of powder and ball, purchased a few indispensable articles, and then returned to the desert.

No one knew who they were, or whence they came. Valentine and his friend maintained the most complete silence as to the events of their life which had preceded their appearance in these parts. Only one thing had betrayed the nationality of Valentine, whom his comrade called Koutonepi, a word belonging to the language of the Aucas, and signifying "The Valiant." On his chest the hunter wore the cross of the Legion of Honor.

Chance had one day made them acquainted with Don Miguel Zarate under strange circumstances, and since then an uninterrupted friendship had been maintained between them. Don Miguel, during a tempestuous night, namely, had only owed his life to the accuracy of Valentine's aim, who sent a bullet through the head of the Mexican's horse at the moment when, mad with terror, and no longer obeying the bridle, it was on the point of leaping into an abyss with its master. Don Miguel had sworn eternal gratitude to his savior.

Valentine and Curumilla had made themselves tutors of his children, who, for their part, felt a deep friendship for the hunters. Don Pablo had frequently made long hunting parties in the desert with them; and it was to them he owed the certainty of his aim, his skill in handling weapons, and his knack in taming horses.

Still, despite the sympathy and friendship which so closely connected these different persons, and the confidence which formed the basis of that friendship, Don Miguel and his children had never been able to obtain from the hunters information as to events that had passed prior to their arrival in this country.

Wrapped in Indian stoicism, intrenched in habitual sullenness, it was their wont to answer all questions by a shake of the head, but nothing further.

The hunter and the Mexican were seated by the fire, while Curumilla, armed with his scalping-knife, was busily flaying the two jaguars so skillfully killed by Don Miguel, and which were two magnificent brutes.

"Eh, comrade!" Don Miguel said, with a laugh; "I was beginning to lose patience, and fancy you had forgotten the meeting you had yourself given me."

"I never forget any thing, as you know," Valentine answered, seriously; "and if I did not arrive here sooner, it was because the road is long from my hut to this clearing."

"Heaven forbid that I should reproach you, my friend! Still I confess to you that the prospect of passing the night alone in this forest only slightly pleased me, and I should have been off had you not arrived before sunset."

"You would have done wrong, Don Miguel: what I have to tell you is of the utmost importance to you. Who knows what the result might have been had I not been able to warn you?"

"You alarm me, my friend."

"I will explain. In the first place let me tell you that you committed, a few days back, a grave imprudence, whose consequences threaten to be most serious for you."

"What is it?"

"I said one, but ought to have said two."

"I am waiting till you think proper to express yourself more clearly," Don Miguel said, with a slight tinge of impatience, "before I answer."

"You have quarreled with the bandit."

"Red Cedar."

"Yes; and when you had him in your power you let him escape, instead of killing him out and out."

"That is true, and I was wrong. What would you do? The villain has as tough a life as an alligator. But be at ease. If ever he fall into my hands again, I swear that I will not miss him."

"In the mean while you did do so—that is the evil."

"Why so?"

"You will understand me. This man is one of those villains, the scum of the United States, too many of whom have lived on the frontier during the last few years. I do not know how he contrived to deceive your New York agent, but he gained his confidence so cleverly that the latter told him

all the secrets he knew about your enterprise."

"He told me so himself."

"Very good. It was then, I suppose, that you stabbed him?"

"Yes, and at the same time I plucked out his claws; that is to say, I seized the letters he held, and which might compromise me."

"A mistake. This man is too thorough-paced a scoundrel not to foresee all the chances of his treason. He had a last letter, the most important of all; and that you did not take from him."

"I took three."

"Yes, but there were four. As the last, however, in itself was worth as much as the other three, he always wore it about him in a leather bag hung round his neck by a steel chain: you did not dream of looking for that."

"But what importance can this letter, I do not even remember writing, possess, that you should attach such weight to it?"

"It is merely the agreement drawn up between yourself, General Ibanez, and Mr. Wood, and bearing your three signatures."

"In that case I am lost," the Mexican exclaimed in terror, "for if this man really possesses such a document, he will not fail to employ it in order to be revenged on me."

"Nothing is lost, so long as a man's heart beats in his breast, Don Miguel. The position is critical I allow, but I have saved myself in situations far more desperate than the one you are now in."

"What is to be done?"

"Red Cedar has been about again for two days. His first care, so soon as he could sit a horse, was to go to Santa Fé, the capital of New Mexico, and denounce you to the Governor. This has nothing to surprise you from such a man."

"Then I can only fly as speedily as I may."

"Wait. Every man has in his heart at least one of the seven deadly sins as a bait for the demon."

"What are you driving at?"

"You will see. Fortunately for us, Red Cedar has them all seven, I believe, in the finest state of development. Avarice, before all, has reached its acme with him."

"Well?"

"This happened. Our man denounced you to the Governor as a conspirator, etc., but was careful not to give up the proofs he possessed in support of the denunciation at the outset. When General Isturitz, the Governor, asked him for these proofs, he answered that he was ready to supply them in exchange for the sum of one hundred thousand piastres in gold."

"Ah!" the haciennero said with a breath of relief, "and what did Isturitz say?"

"The General is one of your most inveterate enemies, I grant, and he would give a good deal for the pleasure of having you shot."

"That is true."

"Yes, but still the sum appeared to him, as it really is, exorbitant, the more so as he would have to pay it all himself, as the Government does not recognize transactions of that nature."

"Well, what did Red Cedar do then?"

"He did not allow himself beaten; on the contrary, he told the General he would give him a week to reflect, and quietly left the Cabildo."

"Hum! and on what day was this visit paid?"

"Yesterday morning: so that you have six days still left for action."

"Six days—that is very little."

"Eh?" the Frenchman said, with a shrug of his shoulders impossible to describe. "In my country—"

"Yes, but you are a Frenchman."

"That is true: hence I allow you twice the time we should require. Come, let us put joking aside. You are a man of more than common energy; you really wish the welfare of your country, so do not let yourself be crushed by the first reverse. Who knows but that it may be all for the best?"

"Ah, my friend, I am alone! General Ibanez, who alone could help me in this critical affair, is fifty leagues off. What can I do? Nothing."

"All. I foresaw your objection," Eagle-wing, the chief of the Coras, has gone from me to warn the General. You know with what speed Indians travel: so he will bring us the General in a few hours, I feel convinced."

Don Miguel regarded the hunter with mingled admiration and respect.

"You have done that, my friend?" he said to him as he warmly pressed his hand.

"By Jove!" Valentine said gayly, "I have done something else too. When the time arrives I will tell you what it is. But let us not lose an hour. What do you intend to do for the present?"

"Act."

"Good; that is the way I like to hear you talk."

"Yes, but I must first come to an understanding with the General."

"That is true; but it is the least thing," Valentine answered as he looked skyward, and consulted the position of the stars. "It is now eight o'clock. Eagle-wing and the man he brings must be at midnight at the entrance of the *Canon del Buitre*. We have four hours before us, and that is more than we require, as we have only ten leagues to go."

"Let us go, let us go!" Don Miguel exclaimed, eagerly.

"Wait a moment; there is no such hurry. Don't be alarmed; we shall arrive in time."

He then turned to Curumilla, and said to him in Araucano a few words which the hacendero did not understand. The Indian rose without replying, and disappeared in the density of the forest.

"You know," Valentine continued, "that I prefer, through habit, traveling on foot; still, as under present circumstances minutes are precious, and we must not lose them, I have provided two horses."

"You think of every thing, my friend."

"Yes, when I have to act for those I love," Valentine answered, with a retrospective sigh.

There was a moment's silence between the two men, and at the end of scarce a quarter of an hour there was a noise in the shrubs, the branches parted, and Curumilla re-entered the clearing, holding two horses by the bridle. These noble animals, which were nearly untamed *mustangs*, bore a striking resemblance to the steeds of the Apaches, on whose territory our friends now were. They were literally covered with eagle-plumes, beads, and ribbons, while long red and white spots completed their disguise, and rendered it almost impossible to recognize them.

"Mount!" Don Miguel exclaimed, so soon as he saw them. "Time is slipping away."

"One word yet," Valentine remarked.

"Speak."

"You still have as chaplain a certain monk of the name of Fray Ambrosio?"

"Yes."

"Take care of that man—he betrays you."

"You believe it?"

"I am sure of it."

"Good! I will remember."

"All right. Now we will be off," Valentine said, as he buried his spurs in his horse's flanks.

And the three horsemen rushed into the darkness with headlong speed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE AGREEMENT.

THE day on which our story commences, the village of the Paso del Norte presented an extraordinary appearance. The bells were ringing out peals, for the three hundredth anniversary of its foundation was being celebrated.

In a house of poor appearance, built, like all its neighbors, of earth bricks, some twenty-five fellows, whom it was easy to recognize as adventurers by the feathers in their hats, their upturned mustaches, and especially by the long bronze-hilted sword they wore on the thigh, were drinking at the gambling-tables, while yelling like deaf men, and threatening at every moment to unsheathe their weapons.

In a corner of the room occupied by these troublesome guests two men, seated opposite each other at a table, seemed plunged in deep thought, and looked around them absently, not thinking about drinking the contents of their glasses, which had not been emptied for more than half an hour. These two men presented the most striking contrast. They were still young. The first, aged twenty-five at the most, had one of those frank, honest, and energetic faces which call for sympathy, and attract respect. His pallid brow, his face of a delicate hue, surrounded by his long black curls, his straight and flexible nose, his mouth filled with a double row of teeth of dazzling whiteness, and surmounted by a light brown mustache, gave him a stamp of distinction, which was the more striking owing to the strict, and perhaps common, style of his attire.

He wore the costume of the wood-rangers. A Panama straw hat was thrown on the table, within reach of his hand, by the side of an American rifle and two double-barreled pistols. A dirk hung on his left side, and the hilt of a long knife peeped out of his left boot.

His companion was short and thick-set; but his well-knit limbs and his outstanding

muscles indicated no ordinary strength. His face, the features of which were commonplace enough, had a cunning look, which suddenly disappeared to make room for a certain nobility, whenever, under the influence of any sudden emotion, his eyebrows contracted, and his glance, ordinarily veiled, flashed forth. He wore nearly the same garb as his comrade; but his hat, stained with rain, and the colors of his zarape, faded by the sun, evidenced lengthened wear. Like the first one we described, he was well armed.

It was easy to see at the first glance that these two men did not belong to the Mexican race. Indeed, their conversation would have removed any doubts on that head, for they spoke in the French dialect employed in Canada.

"Hum!" the first said, taking up his glass, which he carelessly raised to his lips. "After due consideration, Harry, I believe we shall do better by mounting our horses again, and starting, instead of remaining in this horrible den, amid these Pagans, who croak like frogs before a storm."

"Dence take your impatience!" the other replied, ill-temperedly. "Can't you remain a moment at rest?"

"You call it a moment, Harry. Why, we have been here an hour."

"By Jove! Dick, you're a wonderful fellow," the other continued, with a laugh.

"Do you think that business can be settled all in a moment?"

"After all, what is our game? For may the old one twist my neck, or a grizzly give me a hug, if I know the least in the world! For five years we have hunted and slept side by side. We have come from Canada together to this place. I have grown into a habit—I can not say why—of referring to you every thing that concerns our mutual interests. Still I should not be sorry to know, if only for the rarity of the fact, why on earth we left the prairies, where we were so well off, to come here, where we are so badly off."

"Have you ever repented, up to to-day, the confidence you placed in me?"

"I do not say so, Harry. Heaven forbid! Still I think—"

"You think wrong," the young man sharply interrupted. "Let me alone, and before three months you shall have three times your hat full of massive gold, or call me a fool."

At this dazzling promise the eye of Dick, the smaller of the hunters, glistened like two stars. He regarded his comrade with a species of admiration.

"Oh, oh!" he said, in a low voice, "it is a placer, is it?"

"Hang it!" the other said, with a shrug of his shoulders, "were it not, should I be here? But silence, our man has arrived."

Presently a man entered. On his appearance a sudden silence fell on the place, the adventurers rose as if moved by a spring, respectfully took off their plumed hats, and ranged themselves with downcast eyes to let him pass. The man remained for an instant on the threshold, took a profound glance at the company, and then walked toward the two hunters.

This man wore the gown of a monk; he had the ascetic face, with the harsh features and sharply-marked lines, that forms, as it were, the type of the Spanish monks of which Titian has so admirably caught the expression on his canvas. He passed through the adventurers, holding out right and left his wide sleeves, which they reverentially kissed. On approaching the two hunters he turned round.

"Continue your sports, my sons," he said to the company; "my presence need not disturb your frolics for I only wished to speak for a few moments with these two gentlemen."

The adventurers did not let the invitation be repeated, but took their places again tumultuously. The monk smiled, and seated himself between the two hunters, while bending a searching glance on them. The latter had followed with a mocking eye all the interludes of this little scene, and without making a movement, they let the monk seat himself by their side.

The monk, without any observation, rolled a cigarette, and then leaning his elbows on the table, and bending forward, said:

"You are punctual."

"We have been waiting an hour," Dick observed, in a rough voice.

"What is an hour in the presence of eternity?" the monk said, with a smile.

"Let us not lose any more time," Harry continued. "What have you to propose to us?"

The monk looked around him suspiciously, and lowered his voice.

"I can, if you like, make you rich in a few days."

"What is the business!" Dick asked.

"Of course," the monk continued "this

fortune I offer you is a matter of indifference to me. If I have an ardent desire to obtain it, it is, in the first place, because it belongs to nobody, and will permit me to relieve the wretchedness of thousands of beings confided to my charge."

"Of course, *senor padre*," Harry answered, seriously. "Let us not weigh longer on these details. According to what you told me a few days back, you have discovered a rich placer."

"Not I," the monk sharply objected.

"No consequence, provided that it exists," Dick answered.

"Pardon me, but it is of great consequence to me. I do not wish to take on myself the responsibility of such a discovery. If, as I believe, people will go in search of it, it may entail the death of several persons, and the church abhors bloodshed."

"Very good; you only desire to profit by it."

"Not for myself."

"For your parishioners. Very good; but let us try to come to an understanding, if possible, for our time is too precious for us to waste it in empty talk."

The monk crossed himself, and said:

"How you have retained the impetuosity of your French origin! Have a little patience, and I will explain myself."

"That is all we desire."

"But you will promise me—"

"Nothing," Dick interrupted. "We are hunters, and not accustomed to pledge ourselves so lightly before knowing positively what is asked of us."

Harry supported his friend's words by a nod. The monk took two or three heavy puffs at his cigarette.

"Your will be done," he then said. "You are terrible men. This is the affair."

"Go on."

"A poor scamp of a miner, lost I know not how, in the great desert, discovered at a considerable distance off, between the Rio Gila and the Colorado, the richest placer the wildest imagination can conceive. According to his statement, the gold is scattered over the surface, for an extent of two or three miles, in nuggets, each of which would make a man's fortune. This gambusino, dazzled by such treasures, but unable to appropriate them alone, displayed the greatest energy, and braved the utmost perils, in order to gain civilized regions. It was only through boldness and temerity that he succeeded in escaping the countless enemies who spied and tracked him on all sides; but heaven at length allowed him to reach Paso safe and sound."

"Very good," Dick observed. "All this may possibly be true; but why did you not bring this gambusino, instead of talking to us about the placer, of which you know as little as we do? He would have supplied us with information which is indispensable for us, in the event of our consenting to help you in looking for this treasure."

"Alas!" the monk replied, hypocritically casting his eyes down, "the unhappy man was not destined to profit by this discovery, made at the price of so many perils. Scarce two days after his arrival at Paso he quarreled with another gambusino, and received a stab which sent him a few hours later to the tomb."

"In that case," Harry observed, "how did you learn all these details, *senor padre*?"

"In a very simple way, my son. It was I who reconciled the poor wretch in his last moments with Heaven; and," he added with an air of compunction splendidly assumed, "when he understood that his end was at hand, and that nothing could save him, he confided to me, in gratitude for the consolations I bestowed on him, what I have just told you, revealed to me the situation of the placer, and for greater certainty gave me a clumsy chart he had drawn out on the spot. You see that we can proceed almost with certainty."

"Yes," said Harry, thoughtfully; "but why, instead of first applying to the Mexicans, your countrymen, did you propose to us to help you in your enterprise?"

"Because the Mexicans are men who can not be trusted, and before reaching the placer we should have to fight the Apaches and Comanches, on whose territory it is situated."

After these words there was a rather lengthened silence between the three speakers: each was reflecting deeply on what he had just heard. The monk tried to read with cunning eye the impression produced on the hunters by his confidences; but his hopes were deceived. Their faces remained unmoved. At length Dick spoke in a rough voice, after exchanging a meaning look with his comrade.

"All that is very fine," he said; "but it is absurd to suppose that two men, however brave they may be, can attempt such an enterprise in unknown regions peopled by ferocious tribes. It would require at least

fifty resolute and devoted men, otherwise nothing could be possible."

"You are right, and hence I did not calculate on you alone. You will have determined men under your orders, chosen carefully by myself, and I shall also accompany you."

"Unluckily, if you have counted on us, you are mistaken, *senor padre*," Harry said peremptorily. "We are honest hunters; but the trade of a gambusino does not at all suit us. Even if we had a chance of gaining an incalculable fortune, we would not consent to take part in an expedition of gold-seekers."

"Not even if Red Cedar were at the head of the expedition, and consented to take the direction?" the monk said in a honeyed voice, and with a side glance.

The hunter started, a feverish blush suffused his face, and it was in a voice choked by emotion that he exclaimed:

"Have you spoken with him about it?"

"Here he is; you can ask him," the monk answered.

In fact, a man was entering the *meson* at this moment. Harry looked down in confusion, while Dick tapped the table with his dagger and whistled. A smile of undefinable meaning wandered over the monk's pallid lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

RED CEDAR.

RED CEDAR was more than six feet in height; his enormous head was fastened to his square shoulders by a short and muscular neck, like a bull's; his bony members were covered with muscles hard as ropes. In short, his whole person was a specimen of brute strength at its culminating point.

A fox-skin cap, pressed down on his head, allowed escape to a few tufts of coarse grayish hair, and fell on his little gray eyes, which were close to a nose that was hooked like the beak of a bird of prey; his wide mouth was filled with white, large teeth; his cheek-bones were prominent and purpled; and the lower part of his face disappeared in a thick black beard, mingled with gray hairs. He wore a hunting-shirt of striped calico, fastened round the waist by a strap of brown leather, through which were passed two pistols, an ax, and a long knife; a pair of leggings of tawny leather, sewed at equal distances with hair, fell down to his knees; while his legs were protected by Indian moccasins, ornamented with a profusion of beads and bells. A game-bag of fawn-skin, which seemed full, fell over his right hip; and he held in his hand an American rifle, studded with copper-nails.

No one knew who Red Cedar was, or whence he came. About two years prior to the period of our story opening he had suddenly made his appearance in the country, accompanied by a wife of a certain age—a species of *Megara*, of masculine form and repellant aspect; a girl of seventeen; and three vigorous lads, who resembled him too closely not to be his own, and whose ages varied from nineteen to twenty-four.

Red Cedar himself appeared to be fifty-five at the most. The name by which he was known had been given him by the Indians, of whom he had declared himself the implacable enemy, and boasted that he had killed two hundred. The old woman was called Betsy; the girl, Ellen; the eldest son, Nathan; the second, Sutter; and the last, Shaw.

This family had built a shanty in the forest at Buffalo Valley, and lived alone in the desert, without having entered into any relations with the inhabitants of the village, or the trappers and wood-rangers, its neighbors. This mysterious conduct had given rise to numerous comments; but all had remained without reply or solution, and after two years they remained as perfect strangers as on the day of their arrival.

Still, mournful and sad stories were in circulation on their account: they inspired an instinctive hatred and involuntary terror. Some said in a whisper that old Red Cedar and his three sons were nothing less than 'scalp-hunters'; that is to say, in the public esteem, people placed beneath the pirates of the prairies, that unclean breed of birds of prey which everybody fears and despises.

The entry of Red Cedar was significant: the otherwise unscrupulous men who filled the saloon hurriedly retired on his approach, and made room for him with a zeal mingled with disgust. The old partisan crossed the room with head erect: a smile of haughty disdain played round his thin lips at the sight of the effect his presence produced, and he went up to the monk and his two companions. On reaching them he roughly placed the butt of his rifle on the ground, leaned his two crossed hands upon the barrel, and after bending a cunning glance on the persons before him, said to the monk in a hoarse voice:

"The deuce take you! Here I am: what do you want with me?"

Far from being vexed at this brutal address, the latter smiled on the colossus, and held out his hand to him, as he graciously made answer:

"You are welcome, Red Cedar: we were expecting you. Sit down, and we will talk while drinking a glass of pulque."

"The deuce twist your neck, and may your accursed pulque choke you! Do you take me for your sort?" the other answered as he fell into the seat offered him. "Order me some brandy, and that of the strongest. I am not a baby I suppose."

Without making the slightest observation, the monk rose, went to speak with the host, and presently returned with a bottle, from which he poured a bumper for the old hunter. The latter emptied the glass at a draught, put it back on the table with a sonorous 'hum!' and turned to the monk with a grimacing smile.

"Come, the devil is not always so black as he looks," he said, as he passed his hand over his mouth to wipe his mustache. "I see that we can come to an understanding."

"It will depend on you, Red Cedar. Here are two worthy Canadian hunters who will do nothing without your support."

The Hercules took a side glance at the young men.

"Eh!" he said, "what do you want with these children? Did I not promise you to reach the placer with my sons only?"

"He! he! you are powerfully built, both you and your lads, I allow; but I doubt whether four men, were they twice as strong as you are, could carry out this affair successfully. You will have numerous enemies to combat on your road."

"All the better! The more there are, the more we shall kill," he answered, with a sinister laugh.

"*Senor padre*," Dick interrupted, "as far as I am concerned, I care little about it."

But he was suddenly checked by a meaning glance from his mate.

"What do you care little about, my pretty lad?" the giant asked in a mocking voice.

"Nothing," the young man answered dryly. "Suppose I had not spoken."

"Good," Red Cedar remarked; "it shall be as you wish. Here's your health."

And he poured the rest of the bottle into his glass.

"Come," said Harry, "let us have but few words. Explain yourself once for all, without beating about the bush, *senor padre*."

"Yes," Red Cedar observed, "men ought not to waste their time thus in chattering."

"Very good. This, then, is what I propose. Red Cedar will collect within three days from this time thirty resolute men, of whom he will take the command, and we will start immediately in search of the placer. Does it suit you in that way?"

"Hm!" Red Cedar said. "In order to go in search of the placer we must know a little in what direction it is, or deuce take me if I undertake the business!"

"Do not trouble yourself about that, Red Cedar; I will accompany you. Have I not a plan of the country?"

The colossus shot at the monk a glance which sparkled under his dark eyelash, but he hastened to moderate its brilliancy by letting his eyes fall.

"That is true," he said with feigned indifference; "I forgot that you were coming with us. Then you will leave your parishioners during your absence?"

"Heaven will watch over them."

"Eh! it will have its work cut out. However, that does not concern me at all. But why did you want me to come to this place?"

"In order to introduce you to these two hunters, who will accompany us."

"I beg your pardon," Dick observed, "but I do not exactly see of what use I can be to you in all this: my aid, and that of my mate, do not appear to me to be indispensable."

"On the contrary," the monk answered, quickly, "I reckon entirely on you."

The giant had risen.

"What!" he said, as he roughly laid his enormous hand on Dick's shoulder, "you do not understand that this honorable personage, who did not hesitate to kill a man in order to rob him of the secret of the placer, has a terrible fear of finding himself alone with me on the prairie? He fears that I shall kill him in my turn to rob him of the secret of which he became master by a crime. Ha! ha! ha!"

And he turned his back unceremoniously.

"How can you suppose such things, Red Cedar?" the monk exclaimed.

"Do you fancy that I did not read you?" the latter answered. "But it is all the same to you. Do as you please: I leave you at liberty to act as you like."

"What! you are off already?"

"Hang it! what have I to do any longer here? All is settled between us. In three days thirty of the best frontiersmen will be assembled by my care at Grizzly Bear Creek, where we shall expect you."

After shrugging his shoulders once again he went off without any salute, or even turning his head.

"It must be confessed," Dick observed, "that the man has a most villainous face. What a hideous fellow!"

"Oh!" the monk answered, with a sigh, "the exterior is nothing. You should know the inner man."

"Why, in that case, do you have any dealings with him?"

The monk blushed slightly.

"Because it must be so," he muttered.

"All right for you," Dick continued; "but as nothing obliges my friend and myself to have any more intimate relations with that man, you must not mind, *senor padre*, if—"

"Silence, Dick!" Harry shouted, angrily.

"You do not know what you are talking about. We will accompany you, *senor padre*. You can reckon on us to defend you if necessary, for I suppose Red Cedar is right."

"In what way?"

"You do not wish to trust your life defenselessly in his hands, and you reckoned on us to protect you. Is it not so?"

"Why should I feign any longer? Yes, that man terrifies me, and I do not wish to trust myself to his mercy."

"Do not be alarmed; we shall be there, and on our word as hunters, not a hair of your head shall fall."

A lively satisfaction appeared on the monk's pale face on hearing this generous promise.

"Thanks," he said, warmly.

Harry's conduct appeared so extraordinary to Dick, who knew the lofty sentiments and innate honor of his comrade, that, without striving to fathom the motives which made him act thus, he contented himself by backing up his words with an affirmative nod of the head.

"Be assured, gentlemen, that when we reach the placer, I will give you a large share, and you will have no cause to regret accompanying me."

"The money question has but slight interest with us," Harry answered. "My friend and I are free hunters, caring very little for riches, which would be to us rather a source of embarrassment than of pleasure and enjoyment. Curiosity alone, and the desire of exploring strange countries, are sufficient to make us undertake this journey."

"Whatever the reason that makes you accept my proposals, I am not the less obliged to you."

"Now you will permit us to take leave of you, and we shall hold ourselves at your orders."

"Go, gentlemen; I will not keep you longer. I know where to find you when I want you."

The young men took up their hats, slung their rifles on their shoulders, and left the saloon. The monk looked after them.

"Oh!" he muttered, "I believe I can trust to those men: they have still in their veins a few drops of that honest blood which despises treachery. No matter," he added, as if on reflection; "I will take my precautions."

The monk rose and looked around him. The room was full of adventurers, who drank or played at *monte*, and whose energetic faces stood out in the semi-obscurity of the room, which was scarce lighted by a smoky lamp. After a moment's reflection the monk boldly struck the table with his clenched fist, and shouted in a loud voice:

"Friends, I invite you to listen to me. I have, I fancy, an advantageous proposal to make to you."

The company turned their heads; all approached the monk, round whom they grouped themselves curiously.

"Friends," he continued, "if I am not mistaken, all present are gentlemen whom fortune has more or less ill-treated."

The adventurers, by an automatic movement of extraordinary regularity, bowed their heads in affirmation.

"If you wish it," he continued, with an imperceptible smile, "I will undertake to repair the wrongs she has done you."

The adventurers picked up their ears.

"Speak, speak!" they shouted, with delight.

"What is the affair?" a man with a hang-dog face said, who stood in the front ranks.

"A war-party which I intend to lead shortly into *Apacheria*," the monk said, "and for which purpose I need you."

At this proposition the first ardor of the adventurers visibly cooled down. The Apaches and Comanches inspire an invincible terror in the inhabitants of the Mexican

frontiers. The monk guessed the effect he had produced; but he continued, as if not observing any thing:

"I take you all into my service for a month, at the rate of four piasters a day."

At this magnificent offer the eyes of the adventurers sparkled with greed, fear gave way to avarice, and they all exclaimed:

"We accept, reverend father!"

"But," the man continued who had already spoken, "we shall be happy, senior padre, if, before starting, you would give us your holy benediction, and absolve us from the few venial sins we may have committed."

"Yes," the company yelled, "we shall be happy if you consent to that, reverend father."

The monk appeared to reflect: the adventurers anxiously waited.

"Well, be it so," he answered, after a moment. "As the work in which I am about to employ you is so meritorious, I will give you my blessing, and grant you absolution of your sins."

For a few minutes there was a chorus of shouts and exclamations of joy in the room. The monk demanded silence, and when it was restored he said:

"Now, give me each your name, that I may find you when I need you."

He sat down, and began enrolling the adventurers, who, with the men Red Cedar supplied, would form the band with which he hoped to reach the placer.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TWO HUNTERS.

HARRY and Dick, whom we saw seated at a table, in the saloon with Red Cedar and Fray Ambrosio, were, however, very far from resembling those two men morally. They were free and bold hunters, who had spent the greater part of their life in the desert, and who, in the vast solitudes of the prairie, had accustomed themselves to a life free and exempt from those vices which accompany a town residence.

For them gold was only the means to procure the necessary objects for their trade as hunters and trappers; and they never imagined that the possession of a large quantity of that yellow metal they despised would place them in a position to enjoy other pleasures than those they found in their long hunts of wild beasts—hunts so full of strange incidents and striking joys.

Thus Dick had been to the highest degree surprised when he saw his friend eagerly accept the monk's offer, and agree to go in search of the placer; but what even more surprised him was Harry's insisting that Red Cedar must take the lead of the expedition.

Dick was thoroughly acquainted with his friend's upright character and nobility of heart. Hence his conduct under the present circumstances seemed to him perfectly incomprehensible, and he resolved to have an explanation with him.

They had scarce quitted the saloon ere Dick bent down to his companion, and said, while looking at him curiously:

"We have been hunting together for five years, Harry, and up to the present I have ever let myself be guided by you, leaving you free to act as you pleased for our mutual welfare. Still, this evening your conduct has appeared to me so extraordinary that I am obliged, in the name of our friendship, which has never suffered a break up to this day, to ask you for an explanation of what has occurred in my presence."

"For what good, my boy? Do you not know me well enough to be certain that I would not consent to do any dishonorable deed?"

"Up to this evening I would have sworn it, Harry: yes, on my honor I would have sworn it—"

"And now?" the young man asked, stopping and looking his friend in the face.

"Now," Dick answered, with a certain degree of hesitation, "hang it all! I will be frank with you, Harry, as an honest hunter should ever be. Now I do not know if I should do so: no, indeed I should not."

"What you say there causes me great pain, Dick. You oblige me, in order to dissipate your unjust suspicions, to confide to you a secret which is not my own, and which I would not have revealed for any thing in the world."

"Pardon me, Harry, but in my place I am convinced you would act as I am doing. We are very far from our country, which we shall never see again, perhaps. We are responsible for each other, and our actions must be free from all double interpretation."

"I will do what you ask, Dick, whatever it may cost me. I recognize the justice of your observations. I understand how much my conduct this night must have hurt you and appeared ambiguous. I do not wish our

friendship to receive the least wound, or the slightest cloud to arise between us. You shall be satisfied."

"I thank you, Harry. What you tell me relieves my bosom of a heavy load. I confess that I should have been in despair to think badly of you; but the words of that intriguing monk, and the manners of his worthy acolyte, Red Cedar, put me in a passion. Had you not warned me so quickly to silence, I believe—Heaven pardon me—that I should have ended by telling them a piece of my mind."

"You displayed considerable prudence in keeping silence, and be assured that I feel sincerely obliged to you for it. You shall soon understand all, and I feel confident you will completely approve me."

"I do not doubt it, Harry; and now I feel certain I deceived myself. I feel all jolly again."

While speaking thus the two hunters, who were walking with that rapid step peculiar to men habituated to traverse great distances on foot, had crossed the village, and found themselves already far in the plain. The night was magnificent—the sky of a deep blue. An infinite number of glistening stars seemed floating in ether. The moon spread its silvery rays profusely over the landscape. The sharp odor of the flowers perfumed the atmosphere. The two hunters still walked on.

"Where are we going now, Harry?" Dick asked. "I fancy we should do better by taking a few hours' rest, instead of fatiguing ourselves without any definite object."

"I never do any thing without a reason, friend, as you know," Harry answered; "so let me guide you and we shall soon arrive."

"Do as you think proper, my boy; I shall say nothing."

"In the first place you must know that the French hunter, Koutonepi, has begged me, for reasons he did not tell me, to watch Fray Ambrosio. That is one of the motives which made me be present at this night's interview, although I care as little for a placer as for a musk-rat's skin."

"Koutonepi is the first hunter on the frontier; he has often done us a service in the desert. You acted rightly, Harry, in doing what he asked."

"As for the second reason that dictated my conduct, Dick, you shall soon know it."

Half talking, half dreaming, the young men reached Buffalo Valley, and soon entered the forest which served as a lair for the squatter and his family.

"Where the deuce are we going?" Dick could not refrain from saying.

"Silence!" said the other: "we are approaching."

The darkness was profound in the forest: the density of the leafy dome under which they walked completely intercepted the light of the moonbeams. Still the Canadians, long accustomed to a night march, advanced as easily through the chaos of creepers and trees tangled in each other as if they had been in open day. On reaching a certain spot where the trees, growing less closely together, formed a species of clearing, and allowed an uncertain and tremulous light to pass, Harry stopped, and made his comrade a sign to do the same.

"This is the place," he said. "Still, as the person I have come to see expects me to be alone, and your unexpected presence might cause alarm, hide yourself behind that larch tree: above all be careful not to stir till I call you."

"Oh, oh!" the hunter said with a laugh, "have you led me to a love-meeting?"

"You shall judge," Harry replied laconically. "Hide yourself."

Dick, greatly troubled, did not need the invitation to be repeated: he concealed himself behind the tree his friend had indicated, and which would have sheltered a dozen men behind its enormous stem. So soon as Harry was alone he raised his fingers to his lips, and at three different intervals imitated the cry of an owl with such perfection that Dick himself was deceived, and mechanically looked up to seek the bird in the tall branches of the tree by which he stood. Almost immediately a slight noise was audible in the shrubs, and a graceful and white form appeared in the glade. It was Ellen, who walked rapidly toward the young man.

"Oh, it is you, Harry!" she said with joy. "Heaven be blessed! I was afraid you would not come, as it is late."

"It is true, Ellen; pardon me. I made all possible speed, however; and it is not my fault that I did not arrive sooner."

"How good you are, Harry, to take so much trouble for my sake! How can I ever recognize the continual services you do me?"

"Oh! do not speak about them. It is a happiness for me to do any thing agreeable to you."

"Alas!" the maiden murmured, "Heaven is my witness that I feel a deep friendship for you, Harry."

The young man sighed gently.

"I have done what you asked of me," he said, suddenly.

"Then it is true my father is thinking about leaving this country to go further still?"

"Yes, Ellen, and into frightful countries, among the ferocious Indians."

The girl gave a start of terror.

"Do you know the reason of his going?" she continued.

"Yes; he is about to look for a gold-placer."

"Alas! who will protect me, who will defend me in future, if we go away?"

"I, Ellen!" the hunter exclaimed impetuously. "Have I not sworn to follow you everywhere?"

"It is true," she said, sadly; "but why should you risk your life on the distant journey we are about to undertake? No, Harry, remain here; I can not consent to your departure. From what I have heard say, the band my father commands will be numerous—it will have scarce any thing to fear from the Indians; while, on the other hand, you, compelled to hide yourself, will be exposed alone to terrible danger. No, Harry, I will not permit it."

"Undeceive yourself, Ellen. I shall not be alone, for I am a member of your father's band."

"Is it possible, Harry?" she exclaimed with an expression of joy.

"I enrolled myself this very evening."

"Oh!" she said, "then in that case we can often meet?"

"Whenever you please, Ellen, as I shall be there."

"Oh! now I am anxious to be away from here, and wish we had already started."

"It will not be long first, set your mind at rest. I am convinced that we shall start within the week."

"Thanks for the good news you bring me, Harry."

"Are your father and mother still unkind to you, Ellen?"

"It is nearly always the same thing; and yet their conduct toward me is strange. It often seems to me incomprehensible, as it is so marked with peculiarities. There are moments in which they seem to love me dearly. My father especially caresses and embraces me, and then all at once, I know not why, repulses me rudely and looks at me in a way that causes me to shudder."

"That is indeed strange, Ellen."

"Is it not? There is one thing above all I can not explain."

"Tell it me, Ellen: perhaps I can do so."

"You know that all my family are Protestants?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am a Catholic."

"That is certainly curious."

"I wear round my neck a small golden crucifix. Every time accident makes this trinket glisten before my father and mother they grow furious, threaten to beat me, and order me to hide it at once. Do you understand the meaning of this, Harry?"

"No, I do not, Ellen; but, take my advice, leave every thing to time: perhaps it will enable us to find a clue to the mystery which we seek in vain at this moment."

"Well, your presence has rendered me happy for a long time, Harry, so now I will retire."

"Already?"

"I must, my friend. Believe me that I am as sad as yourself at this separation; but my father has not yet returned, and may arrive at any moment. If he noticed that I was not asleep, who knows what might happen?"

While saying the last words the girl held out her delicate hand to the hunter, who raised it to his lips passionately. Ellen withdrew it suddenly, and bounding like a startled fawn, darted into the forest, where she soon disappeared, giving the young man a parting word, which caused him to quiver with joy:

"We shall meet soon."

Harry stood for a long time with his eyes fixed on the spot where the vision had disappeared. At length he uttered a sigh, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and turned as if to depart. Dick was before him. Harry gave a start of surprise, for he had forgotten his friend's presence; but the latter smiled good-humoredly.

"I now comprehend your conduct, Harry," he said to him; "you were right to act as you did. Pardon my unjust suspicions and count on me everywhere and always."

Harry silently pressed the hand his friend offered him, and they walked back rapidly in the direction of the village. As they emerged from the forest they passed a man who did not see them. It was Red Cedar. So soon as he had gone a short distance Harry stopped his companion, and pointing to the squatter, whose long black shadow glided through the trees, said, as he laid his hand on his shoulder:

"That man hides in his heart a horrible secret, which I am ignorant of, but have sworn to discover."

CHAPTER XV.

FRAY AMBROSIO.

THE monk remained for a long time in the room, taking down the names of the adventurers he wished to enroll in his band. It was late when he left; but he was satisfied with his night's work, and internally rejoiced at the rich collection of bandits of the purest water he had recruited.

The monks form a privileged caste in Mexico: they can go at all hours of the night wherever they please without fearing the numerous "gentlemen of the road," scattered about all the highways. Their gown inspires a respect which guarantees them from any insult. Besides, Fray Ambrosio, as the reader has doubtless already perceived, was not the man to neglect indispensable precautions. The worthy chaplain carried under his gown a pair of double-barreled pistols, and in his right sleeve he concealed a long knife, sharp as a razor, and pointed as a needle.

Not troubling himself about the solitude that reigned around him, the monk mounted his mule and proceeded quietly to the farm. It was about eleven o'clock.

A few words about Fray Ambrosio, while he is peacefully ambling along the narrow path which will lead him in two hours to his destination, will show all the perversity of the man who is destined to play an unfortunately too important part in the course of our narrative.

One day a gambusino, or gold seeker, who had disappeared for two years, no one knowing what had become of him, and who was supposed to be dead long ago, assassinated in the desert by the Indians, suddenly reappeared at the Paso del Norte. This man, Joaquin by name, was brother to Andres Garote, an adventurer of the worst stamp, whom everybody feared, but who, through the terror he inspired, enjoyed at the Paso in spite of his well-avouched crimes, a reputation and species of impunity which he abused whenever the opportunity offered.

The two brothers began frequenting together the public places of the village, drinking from morn till night, and paying either in gold-dust inclosed in stout quills, or in lumps of native gold. The rumor soon spread that Joaquin had discovered a rich placer, and that his expenses were paid with the specimens he had brought back. The gold-seeker replied neither yes nor no to the several insinuations which his friends, or rather his boon companions, attempted on him. He twinkled his eyes, smiled mysteriously, and if it were observed that, at the rate he was living at, he would soon be ruined, he shrugged his shoulders, saying:

"When I have none left I know where to find others."

And he continued to enjoy his fill of all the pleasures which a wretched hole like Paso can furnish.

Fray Ambrosio had heard speak, like every one else, of the asserted discovery; and his plan was at once formed to become master of this man's secret, and rob him of his discovery, were that possible.

The same evening Joaquin and his brother Andres were drinking, according to their wont, in a public house, surrounded by a crowd of scamps like themselves. Fray Ambrosio, seated at a table with his hands hidden in the sleeve of his gown, and hanging his head, appeared plunged in serious reflections, although he followed with a cunning eye the various movements of the drinkers, and not one of their gestures escaped him.

Suddenly a man entered, with his hand on his hip, and throwing in the face of the first person he passed the cigarette he was smoking, he planted himself in front of Joaquin, to whom he said nothing, but began looking at him impudently, shrugging his shoulders, and laughing ironically at all the gold-seeker said. Joaquin was not patient; he saw at the first glance that this person wished to pick a quarrel with him; and as he was brave, and feared nobody, man or demon, he walked boldly up to him, and looking at him fixedly in his turn, he said to him, as he thrust his face in his:

"Do you seek a quarrel, Tomaso?"

"Why not?" the latter said, impudently, as he noisily placed his glass on the table.

"I am your man. We will fight how you please."

"Bah!" Tomaso said, carelessly, "let us do things properly, and fight with the whole blade."

"Be it so."

The combats that take place between the adventurers are truly like those of wild beasts. These coarse men, with their cruel instincts, like fighting beyond all else. The announcement of this duel caused a thrill

of pleasure to run through the ranks of the bandits who pressed round the two men. The fun was perfect: one of the adversaries would doubtless fall—perhaps both—cries and yells of delight were raised by the spectators.

The duel with knives is the only one that exists in Mexico, and is solely left to the people of the lowest classes. This duel has its rules, which can not be broken under any pretext. The knives usually employed, have blades from fourteen to sixteen inches in length, and the duellists fight according to the gravity of the insult, with one, two, three, six inches, or the entire blade. The inches are carefully measured, and the hand clutches the knife at the marked spot.

This time it was a duel with the whole blade, the most terrible of all. With extraordinary politeness and coolness the landlord had a large ring formed in the middle of the room, where the two adversaries stationed themselves, about six paces from each other at the most.

A deep silence hung over the room, a moment previously so full of life and disturbance: every one anxiously awaited the denouement of the terrible drama that was preparing. Fray Ambrosio alone had not quit his seat or made a sign.

The two men rolled their zarapès round their left arms, planted themselves firmly on their outstretched legs, bent their bodies slightly forward, and gently placing the point of the knife-blade on the arm rounded in front of the chest, they waited, fixing on each other flashing glances. A few seconds elapsed, during which the adversaries remained perfectly motionless: all hearts were contracted, all bosoms heaving.

Striking was the scene offered by these men, with their weather-stained faces and harsh features, and their clothes in rags, forming a circle round the two combatants ready to kill each other in this mean room, slightly illumined by a smoky lamp, which flashed upon the blue blades of the knives; and in the shadow, almost disappearing in his black gown, the monk, with his implacable glance and mocking smile, who, like a tiger thirsting for blood, awaited the hour to pounce on his prey.

Suddenly, by a spontaneous movement rapid as lightning, the adversaries rushed on each other, uttering a yell of fury. The blades flashed, there was a clashing of steel, and both fell back again. Joaquin and Tomaso had both dealt the same stroke, called, in the slang of the country, the "blow of the brave man." Each had his face slashed from top to bottom.

The spectators frenziedly applauded this magnificent opening scene.

"What a glorious fight!" they exclaimed with admiration.

In the mean while the two combatants were again watching for the moment to leap on one another. Suddenly they broke ground; but this time it was no skirmish, but the real fight, atrocious and merciless. They seized each other round the waist, and entwined like serpents, they twisted about, and excited themselves to the struggle by cries of rage and triumph. The enthusiasm of the spectators was at its height: they laughed, clapped hands, and uttered inarticulate howls as they urged the fighters not to loose their hold.

At length the enemies rolled on the ground still enclasped. For some seconds the fight still continued on the ground, and it was impossible to distinguish who was conqueror. All at once one of them bounded to his feet brandishing his knife. It was Joaquin.

His brother rushed toward him to congratulate him on his victory, but suddenly the gold-seeker tottered and fainted. Tomaso did not rise again: he remained motionless, stretched out on the uneven floor. He was dead.

This scene had been so rapid, its conclusion so unforeseen, that, in spite of themselves, the spectators had remained dumb, and as if struck with stupor. Suddenly the priest, whom all had forgotten, rose and walked into the center of the room, looking round with a glance that caused all to let their eyes fall.

"Retire, all of you," he said in a gloomy voice, "now that you have allowed this deed worthy of savages to be accomplished. The priest must offer his ministry, and get back from the demon, if there be still time, the soul of this Christian who is about to die. Begone!"

The adventurers hung their heads, and in a few moments the priest was left alone with the two men, one of whom was dead, the other at the last gasp. No one could say what occurred in that room; but when the priest left, a quarter of an hour later, his eyes flashed wildly. Joaquin had given his parting sigh. On opening the door to go out, Fray Ambrosio jostled against a man, who drew back sharply to make room for him. It was Andres Garote. What was he

doing with his eye at the key-hole while the monk was shriving his brother?

The adventurer told no one what he had seen during this last quarter of an hour, nor did the monk notice in the shade the man he had almost thrown down.

Such was the way in which Fray Ambrosio became master of the gold-seeker's secret, and how he alone knew at present the spot where the placer was.

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO VARIETIES OF VILLAINS.

Now that the reader is well informed touching Fray Ambrosio, we will follow him on his road home. The night was calm, silent, and serene. Not a sound troubled the silence, save the trot of the mule over the pebbles on the road, or at times, in the distance, the snapping bark of the coyotes chasing in a pack, according to their wont, some straggling hind.

Fray Ambrosio ambled gently on, while reflecting on the events of the evening, and calculating mentally the probable profits of the expedition he meditated. He had left far behind him the last houses of the village, and was advancing cautiously along a narrow path that wound through an immense sugarcane field. Already the shadow of the farmhouse walls stood out blackly in the horizon. He expected to reach it in twenty minutes, when suddenly his mule, which had hitherto gone so quietly, pricked up its ears, raised its head, and stopped short.

Roughly aroused from his meditations by this unexpected halt, the monk looked about for some obstacle that might impede his progress. About ten paces from him a man was standing in the middle of the path.

Fray Ambrosio was a man not easily to be frightened: besides, he was well armed. He drew out one of the pistols hidden under his gown, cocked it, and prepared to cross-question the person who so resolutely barred his way. But the latter, at the sharp sound of setting the hammer, thought it prudent to make himself known, and not await the consequences of an address nearly always stormy under similar circumstances.

"Hallo!" he shouted in a loud voice, "return your pistol to your belt, Fray Ambrosio; I only want to talk with you."

"The hour and moment are singularly chosen for a friendly conversation, my good fellow," said the monk.

"Time belongs to nobody," the stranger answered sententiously. "I am obliged to choose that which I have at my disposal."

"That is true," the monk said as he quietly uncocked his pistol, though not returning it to his belt. "Who are you, and why are you so anxious to speak with me? Do you want to confess?"

"Have you not recognized me yet, Fray Ambrosio? Must I tell you my name that you may know with whom you have to deal?"

"Needless, my good sir, needless; but how is it, Red Cedar, that I meet you here? What can you have so pressing to communicate to me?"

"You shall know if you will stop for a few moments and dismount."

"The deuce take you with your whims! Can not you tell me that as well to-morrow? Night is getting on, my home is still some distance off, and I am literally worn out."

"Bah! you will sleep capitally by the side of a ditch, where you could not be more comfortable. Besides, what I have to say to you does not admit of delay."

"You wish to make a proposal to me, then?"

"Yes."

"What about, if you please?"

"About the affair we discussed this evening at the Paso."

"Why, I fancied that we had settled all that, and you accepted my offer."

"Not yet, not yet, my master. That will depend upon the conversation we are about to have, so you had better dismount and sit down quietly by my side; for if you don't do it, it will come to nothing."

"The deuce take people who change their minds every minute, and on whom one can not reckon more than on an old surplice!" the monk growled with an air of annoyance, while, for all that, getting off his mule, which he fastened to a shrub.

The squatter did not seem to remark the chaplain's ill-temper, and let him sit down by his side without uttering a syllable.

"Here I am," the monk went on, so soon as he was seated. "I really do not know, Red Cedar, why I yield so easily to all your whims."

"Because you suspect that your interest depends on it: were it not for that you would not do so."

"Why talk thus in the open country, instead of going to your house, where we should be much more comfortable?"

Red Cedar shook his head in denial.

"No," he said; "the open is better for what we have to talk about. Here we need not fear listeners at our doors."

"That is true. Well, go on; I am listening."

"Hum! you insist upon my commanding the expedition you project?"

"Of course. I have known you a long time. I am aware that you are a sure man, perfectly versed in Indian signs; for if I am not mistaken, the greater part of your life has been spent among them."

"Do not speak about what I have done. The question now concerns you, and not me."

"How so?"

"Good, good! Let me speak. You need me, so it is to my interest to make you pay as dearly as I can for me."

"Eh?" the monk muttered, as he made a grimace. "I am not rich, as you are aware."

"Yes, yes; I know that, so soon as you have a few plasters or ounces, the monte table strips you of them immediately."

"Hang it! I have always been unlucky at play."

"For that reason I do not intend asking you for money."

"Very good. If you have no designs on my purse we can easily come to an understanding. You may speak boldly."

"I hope that we shall easily understand one another, the more so as the service I expect from you is almost a mere nothing."

"Come to the point, Red Cedar: and leave off twining your phrases together."

"You know that I have a deadly hatred against Don Miguel Zarate?"

"I have heard some say about it. Did he not lodge his knife somewhere in your chest?"

"Yes, and the blow was so rude that I all but died of it; but, I am on my legs again, after remaining for nearly three weeks on my back like a cast sheep. I want my revenge."

"I can't help saying you are right: in your place, may Satan twist my neck if I would not do the same!"

"For that I count on your help."

"Hum! that is a delicate affair. I have no cause of complaint against Don Miguel—on the contrary: besides, I do not see how I can serve you."

"You shall see."

"Go on, then; I am listening."

"He has a daughter!"

"Donna Clara."

"I mean to carry her off."

"Deuce take the mad ideas that pass through your brain-pan! How would you have me help you in carrying off the daughter of Don Miguel, to whom I owe so many obligations? No, I can not do that, indeed."

"You must, though."

"I will not, I tell you."

"Measure your words well, Fray Ambrosio, for this conversation is serious. Before refusing so peremptorily to give me the help I ask, reflect well."

"I have reflected, Red Cedar, and never will I consent to help you in carrying off the daughter of my benefactor. Say what you like, nothing will ever change my resolution on that head, for it is inflexible."

"Perhaps."

"Oh! whatever may happen, I swear that nothing will make me alter."

"Swear not, Fray Ambrosio, for you will be a perjurer."

"Ta, ta, ta! you are mad, my good fellow. Don't let us waste our time. If you have nothing else to say to me I will leave you, though I take such pleasure in your society."

The two men were standing, and the monk had put his foot in the stirrup. Red Cedar also appeared ready to make a start. At the moment of separation a sudden idea seemed to occur to the squatter. "By the way," he said, carelessly, "be kind enough to give me some information I require."

"What is it now?" the monk asked.

"Oh! a mere trifle," the squatter remarked, indifferently. "It concerns a certain Don Pedro Tudela, whom I think you formerly knew."

"Eh?" the monk exclaimed, as he turned with his leg still in the air.

"Come, come, Fray Ambrosio," Red Cedar continued, in a jeering voice, "let us have a little more talk together. I will tell you, if you like, a very remarkable story about this Don Pedro, with whom you were acquainted."

The monk was livid; a nervous tremor agitated all his limbs; he let loose his mule's bridle, and followed the squatter mechanically, who seated himself tranquilly on the ground, making him a sign to do the same. The monk fell, suppressing a sigh, and wiping away the drops of cold perspiration that beaded on his forehead.

"Eh, eh!" the squatter continued at the end of a moment, "we must allow that Don Pedro was a charming gentleman—a little wild, perhaps; but what would you have? He was young. I remember meeting him at Albany a long time ago—how old one gets!—at the house of one—wait awhile, the name has slipped my memory—could you not help me to it, Fray Ambrosio?"

"I do not know what you mean," the monk said, in a hollow voice.

The man was in a state that would have produced pity; the veins in his forehead were swollen ready to burst; he was choking; his right hand clutched the hilt of his dagger; and he bent on the squatter a glance full of deadly hatred. The latter seemed to see nothing of all this.

"I have it!" he continued. "The man's name was Walter Brunel, a very worthy gentleman."

"Demon!" the monk howled, in a gasping voice, "I know not who made you master of that horrible secret, but you shall die."

And he rushed upon him dagger in hand. Red Cedar had known Fray Ambrosio a long time, and was on his guard. By a rapid movement he checked his arm, twisted it, and seized the dagger, which he threw a long distance off.

"Enough!" he said, in a harsh voice. "We understand one another, my master. Do not play that game with me, for you will be sick of it, I warn you."

The monk fell back on the ground, without the strength to make a sign or utter a syllable. The squatter regarded him for a moment with mingled pity and contempt, and shrugged his shoulders.

"For sixteen years I have held this secret," he said, "and it has never passed my lips. I will continue to keep silence on one condition."

"What is it?"

"I want you to help me in carrying off the haciendero's daughter."

"I will do it."

"Good! I count on your word. Besides, you may be easy, master: I will watch you."

"Enough of threats. What is to be done?"

"When do we start for Apacheria?"

"You are coming, then?"

"Of course."

A sinister smile played round the monk's pale lips.

"We shall start in a week," he said.

"Good! On the day of the start you will hand over the girl to me, one hour before our departure."

"What shall I do to compel her to follow me?"

"That is not my business."

"Be it so," the monk said, with an effort.

"I will do it; but remember, if I ever hold you in my hands, as I am this day in yours, I shall be pitiless, and make you pay for all I suffer at this moment."

"You will be right to do so—it is your due: still I doubt whether you will ever be able to reach me."

"Perhaps."

"Live and learn. In the meanwhile I am your master, and I reckon on your obedience."

"I will obey."

"That is settled. Now one thing more: how many men have you enlisted this evening?"

"About twenty."

"That's not many; but, with the sixty I shall supply, we shall have a very decent band to hold the Indians in check."

"May heaven grant it!"

"Don't be alarmed, my master," the squatter said, re-assuming the friendly tone which he employed at the outset of the conversation; "I pledge myself to lead you straight to your placer. I have not lived ten years with the Indians not to be up to all their tricks."

"Of course," the monk answered as he rose, "you know, Red Cedar, what was agreed upon: the placer will be shared between us. It is, therefore, to your interest to enable us to reach it without obstacle."

"We shall reach it. Now that we have nothing more to say to each other, and have agreed on all points—for we have done so, I think?" he said, significantly.

"Yes, all."

"We can part, and go each home. No matter, my master! I told you that I should succeed in making you alter your mind. Look you, Fray Ambrosio," he added, in an impudent tone, which made the monk turn pale with rage, "people need only to understand one another to do any thing."

He rose, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and turning away sharply, went off with lengthened strides. The monk remained for a moment as if stunned by what had happened. Suddenly he thrust his hand under his gown, seized a pistol, and aimed at the squatter. But ere he had time to pull

the trigger his enemy disappeared, uttering a formidable burst of laughter, which the mocking echo bore to his ear, and revealed to him all the immensity of his impotence.

"Oh!" he muttered, as he got in the saddle, "how did this demon discover the secret which I believed no one knew?"

And he went off gloomy and thoughtful.

Half an hour later he reached the farm, when the gate was opened for him by a trusty peon, for everybody was asleep. It was past midnight.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HUNTER'S CAVE.

We will now return to Don Miguel, who, accompanied by his two friends, is galloping at full speed in the direction of Valentine's hut. Around them nature grew more abrupt, the scenery sterner. They had left the forest, and were galloping over a wide and arid plain. On each side of the way the trees, becoming rarer, defiled like a legion of phantoms. They crossed several tributary streams of the Del Norte, in which their horses were immersed up to the chest.

At length they entered a ravine deeply imbedded between two wooded hills, the soil of which was composed of large flat stones and rounded pebbles. They had reached the Canon del Buitre, so named on account of the numerous vultures constantly perched on the tops of the surrounding hills.

The defile was deserted, and Valentine had his cabin not far from this spot. So soon as the three men had dismounted, Curumilla took the horses and led them to the jocal.

"Follow me," Valentine said to Don Miguel.

The latter obeyed, and the two men began then climbing the escarped flanks of the right-hand hill. The climb was rude, for no road was traced; but the two hunters, long accustomed to force a passage through the most impracticable places, seemed hardly to perceive the difficulty of the ascent, which would have been impossible for men less used to a desert life.

"This spot is really delicious," Valentine said, with the complacent simplicity of a land-owner who boasts of his estate. "If it were day, Don Miguel, you would enjoy from this spot a magnificent view."

"But where are you leading me, my friend? Are you aware that the road is not one of the pleasantest, and I am beginning to feel tired?"

"A little patience: in ten minutes we shall arrive. I am leading you to a natural grotto which I discovered a short time back. It is admirable. At any rate, I was so struck by its beauty that I temporarily abandoned my cabin, and converted it into my residence. Its extent is immense. I am certain, though I never tried to convince myself, that it goes for more than ten leagues under ground. I will not allude to the stalactites that hang from the roof, and form the quaintest and most curious designs; but stay—we have arrived."

In fact, they found themselves in front of a gloomy, gaping orifice, about ten feet high by eight wide.

"Let me do the honors of my mansion," Valentine said.

"Do so, my friend."

The two men entered the grotto: the hunter struck a match, and lit a torch of candle-wood. The fairy picture which suddenly rose before Don Miguel drew from him a cry of admiration. There was an indescribable confusion: here a Gothic chapel, with its graceful, soaring pillars: further on, obelisks, cones, trunks of trees covered with moss and acanthus leaves, hollow stalactites of a cylindrical form, drawn together and ranged side by side like the pipes of an organ, and yielding to the slightest touch varied metallic sounds which completed the illusion. Then, in the immeasurable depths of these cavernous halls, at times formidable sounds arose, which, returned by the echoes, rolled along the sides of the grotto like peals of thunder.

"Oh, it is grand, it is grand!" Don Miguel exclaimed, struck with fear and respect at the sight.

"Does not man," Valentine answered, "feel very small and miserable before these sublime creations of nature, which God has scattered here as if in sport? Oh, my friend! it is only in the desert that we understand the grandeur and infinite omnipotence of the Supreme Being; for at every step man finds himself face to face with Him who placed him on this earth, and traces the mark of His mighty finger engraved in an indelible manner on every thing that presents itself to his sight."

"Yes," Don Miguel said, who had suddenly become thoughtful, "it is only in the desert that a man learns to know, love, and fear God, for He is everywhere."

"Come," said Valentine.

He led his friend to a hall of not more than twenty square feet, the vault of which, however, was more than a hundred yards above them. In this hall a fire was lighted. The two men sat down on the ground and waited, while thinking deeply. After a few moments the sound of footsteps was audible, and the Mexican quickly raised his head. Valentine did not stir, for he had recognized his friend's tread. In fact, within a moment the Indian chief appeared.

"Well?" Valentine asked him.

"Nothing yet," Curumilla laconically answered.

"They are late, I fancy," Don Miguel observed.

"No," the chief continued, "it is hardly past eleven: we are before our time."

"But will they find us here?"

"They know we shall await them in this hall."

After these few words each fell back into his thoughts. The silence was only troubled by the mysterious sounds of the grotto, which echoed nearly at equal intervals with a horrid din. A long period elapsed. All at once, ere any sensible noise had warned Don Miguel, Valentine raised his head with a hurried movement.

"Here they are," he said.

"You are mistaken, my friend," Don Miguel observed; "I heard nothing."

The hunter smiled.

"If you had spent," he said, "as we have, ten years in the desert, interrogating the mysterious voices of the night, your ear would be habituated to the vague rumors and sighs of nature which have no meaning to you at this moment, but which have all a significance for me, and, so to speak, a voice every note of which I understand, and you would not say I was mistaken. Ask the chief: you will hear his answer."

"Two men are climbing the hill at this moment," Curumilla answered sententiously. "They are an Indian and a white man." "How can you recognize the distinction?"

"Very easily," Valentine responded with a smile. "The Indian wears moccasins, which touch the ground without producing any other sound than a species of friction; the step is sure and unhesitating, as taken by a man accustomed to walk in the desert, and only put down his foot firmly; the white man wears high-heeled boots, which at each step produce a distinct and loud sound; the spurs fastened to his boots give out a continuous metallic clink; the step is awkward and timid; at each moment a stone or crumble of earth rolls away under the foot, which is only put down hesitatingly. It is easy to see that the man thus walking is accustomed to a horse, and does not know the use of his feet. Stay! they are now entering the grotto: you will soon hear the signal."

At this moment the cry of the coyote was raised thrice at equal intervals. Valentine answered by a similar cry.

"Well, was I mistaken?" he said.

"I know not what to think, my friend. What astonishes me most is that you heard them so long before they arrived."

"The ground of this cave is an excellent conductor of sound," the hunter answered simply: that is all the mystery."

"The —!" Don Miguel could not refrain from saying; "you neglect nothing, I fancy."

"If a man wants to live in the desert he must neglect nothing: the smallest things have their importance, and an observation carefully made may often save a man's life."

While these few words were being exchanged between the two friends the noise of footsteps was drawing nearer and nearer. Two men appeared: one was Eagle-wing, the chief of the Coras; the second, General Ibanez.

The General was a man of about thirty-five, tall and well-built, with a delicate and intelligent face. His manners were graceful and noble. He bowed cordially to the hacendado and Valentine, squeezed Curumilla's hand, and fell down in a sitting posture by the fire.

"Ouf!" he said, "I am done, gentlemen. I have just ridden an awful distance. My poor horse is foundered, and to recover myself I made an ascent, during which I thought twenty times I must break down; and that would have infallibly happened, had not friend Eagle-wing charitably come to my aid. I must confess that these Indians climb like real cats."

"At length you have arrived, my friend," Don Miguel answered. "Heaven be praised! I was anxious to see you."

"For my part I confess that my impatience was equally lively, especially since I learned the treachery of that scoundrel Red Cedar. That humbug of a Wood sent him to me with so warm a recommendation that, in spite of all my prudence, I let my-

self be taken in, and nearly told him all our secrets. Unfortunately the little I did let him know is sufficient to have us shot a hundred times like vulgar conspirators of no consequence."

"Do not feel alarmed, my friend. After what Valentine told me to-day we have, perchance, a way of foiling the tricks of the infamous spy who has denounced us."

"May Heaven grant it! But nothing will remove my impression that Wood has something to do with what has happened to us. I always doubted that man, who is as cold as an iceberg, sour as a glass of lemonade, and methodical as an old Quaker."

"Who knows, my friend? Perhaps you are right. Unfortunately what is done can not be helped, and our retrospective re-eminations will do us no good."

"That is true; but, as you know, man is the same everywhere. When he has committed a folly he is happy to find a scapegoat on which he can lay the iniquities with which he reproaches himself. That is slightly my case at this moment."

"Do not take more blame on yourself, my friend, than you deserve: I guarantee your integrity and the loyalty of your sentiments. Whatever may happen, be persuaded that I will always do you justice, and, if needed, defend you against all."

"Thanks, Don Miguel. What you say causes me pleasure, and reconciles me with myself. I needed the assurance you give me in order to regain some slight courage, and not let myself be completely crushed by the unforeseen blow which threatens to overthrow our hopes at the very moment when we expected to find them realized."

"Come, come, gentlemen," Valentine said, "time is slipping away, and we have none to waste. Let us seek to find the means by which to repair the check we have suffered. If you permit me I will submit to your approval a plan which, I believe, combines all the desirable chances of success, and will turn in our favor the very treachery to which we have fallen victims."

"Speak, speak, my friend!" the two men exclaimed, as they prepared to listen.

Valentine took the word.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER SERAPHIN.

"GENTLEMEN," said Valentine, "this is what I propose. The treachery of Red Cedar, in surrendering to the Government the secret of your conspiracy, places you in a critical position, from which you can not escape save by violent measures. You are between life and death. You have no alternative save victory or defeat. The powder is fired, the ground is mined under your feet, and an explosion is imminent. Well, then, pick up the glove treachery throws to you—accept frankly the position offered you. Do not wait till you are attacked, but commence the contest. Your enemies will be terrified by your boldness—dashed by this uprising which they are far from expecting especially now, when they imagine they hold in their hands all the threads of the conspiracy—an error which makes them put faith in the revelations of a common spy, and will ruin them if you act with skill—above all, with promptitude. All depends on the first blow. It must be terrible, and terrify them: if not, you are lost."

"All that is true; but we lack time," General Ibanez observed.

"Time is never lacking when a man knows how to employ it properly," Valentine answered, peremptorily. "I repeat, you must be beforehand with your adversaries."

At this moment the sound of footsteps was heard under the vault of the cave. The most extreme silence at once reigned in the chamber where the five conspirators were assembled. Mechanically each sought his weapons. The steps rapidly approached, and a man appeared in the entrance of the hall. On seeing him all present uttered a cry of joy and rose respectfully, repeating, "Father Seraphin!"

The man advanced smiling, bowed gracefully, and answered in a gentle and melodious voice, which went straight to the soul:

"Take your places again, gentlemen, I beg of you. I should be truly vexed if I caused you any disturbance. Permit me only to sit down for a few moments by your side."

They hastened to make room for him. Let us say in a few words who this person was, whose unexpected arrival caused so much pleasure to the people assembled in the grotto.

Father Seraphin was a man of twenty-four at the most. In spite of fatigues and harsh labors, which had left numerous traces on his face, his whole person exhaled a perfume of youth and health.

He was a Frenchman, and belonged to the

order of the Lazarists. For five years he had been traversing, as an indefatigable missionary, with no other weapon than his staff, the unexplored solitudes of Texas and New Mexico, preaching the Gospel to the Indians, while caring nothing for the terrible privations and nameless sufferings he incessantly endured, and the death constantly suspended over his head.

Father Seraphin had gained the friendship and respect of all those with whom accident had brought him into contact. Charmed with meeting a fellow-countryman in the midst of those vast solitudes so distant from that France he never hoped to see again, he had attached himself closely to Valentine, to whom he vowed a deep and sincere affection. From the same motives, the hunter, who admired the greatness of character of this priest so full of true religion, felt himself drawn to him by an irresistible liking. They had frequently taken long journeys together, the hunter guiding his friend to the Indian tribes across the desolate regions of Apacheria.

So soon as Father Seraphin had taken his place near the fire, Eagle-wing and Curumilla hastened to offer him all those slight services which they fancied might be agreeable to him, and offered him a few lumps of roast venison with maize. The missionary gladly gratified the two chiefs, and accepted their offerings.

"It is a long time since we saw you, father," the hacendado said. "You neglect us. My daughter asked me about you only two days ago, for she is anxious to see you."

"Clara is an angel who does not require me," the missionary replied, gently. "I have spent nearly two months with the Comanche tribe of the Tortoise. Those poor Indians claim all my care. They are thirsting for the Divine Word."

"Do you reckon on staying long among us?"

"Yes; this last journey has fatigued me extremely. My health is in a deplorable state, and I absolutely need a few days' rest in order to regain the requisite strength to continue my ministry."

"Well, father, come with me to the Farm: you will remain with us, and make us all truly happy."

"I was going to make that request to you, Don Miguel. I am delighted that you have thus met my wishes. If I accept your obliging offer, it is because I know I shall not incommode you."

"On the contrary, we shall be delighted to have you among us."

"Ah! I know the goodness of your heart."

"Do not make me better than I am, father: there is a spice of egotism in what I am doing."

"How so?"

"Hang it! by laboring at the education of the Indians you render an immense service to the race I have the honor of belonging to; for I, too, am an Indian."

"That is true," the priest answered, with a laugh. "Come, I absolve you from the sin of egotism, in favor of the intention which makes you commit it."

"Father," Valentine then said, "is the game plentiful in the desert just at present?"

"Yes, there is a great deal: the buffaloes have come down from the mountains in herds—the elks, the deer, and the antelopes swarm."

Valentine rubbed his hands.

"It will be a good season," he said.

"Yes, for you. As for myself, I have no cause of complaint, for the Indians have been most attentive to me."

"All the better. I ever tremble when I know you are among those red devils. I do not speak of the Comanches, who are warriors I esteem, and have always displayed the sincerest affection for you; but I have a terrible fear lest those villains of Apaches may play you a wicked trick some fine day."

"Why entertain such ideas, my friend?"

"They are correct. You can not imagine what treacherous and cruel cowards those Apache thieves are. I know them, and carry their marks; but do not frighten yourself. If ever they ventured on any extremities against you, I know the road to their villages: there is not a nook in the desert which I have not thoroughly explored. It is not for nothing I have received the name of the 'Trail-hunter.' I swear to you I will not leave them a scalp."

"Valentine, you know I do not like to hear you speak so. The Indians are poor ignorant men, who know not what they do, and must be pardoned for the evil they commit."

"All right—all right!" the hunter growled. "You have your ideas on that score, and I mine."

"Yes," the missionary replied, with a smile, "but I believe mine the better."

"It is possible. You know I do not dis-

cuss that subject with you; for I know not how you do it, but you always succeed in proving to me that I am wrong."

Everybody laughed at this sally.

"And what are the Indians doing at this moment?" Valentine continued. "Are they still fighting?"

"No; I succeeded in bringing Unicorn, the principal chief of the Comanches, and Stanapat (the Handful of Blood,) the Apache sachem, to an interview, at which peace was sworn."

"Hum!" Valentine said, incredulously, "that peace will not last long, for Unicorn has too many reasons to owe the Apaches a grudge."

"Nothing leads to the supposition, at present, that your forebodings will be speedily realized."

"Why so?"

"Because, when I left Unicorn, he was preparing for a grand buffalo-hunt, in which five hundred picked warriors were to take part."

"Ah, ah! and where do you think the hunt will take place, father?"

"I know for a certainty, because, when I left Unicorn, he begged me to invite you to it, as he knew I should see you shortly."

"I willingly accept, for a buffalo-hunt always had great attractions for me."

"You will not have far to go to find Unicorn, for he is scarce ten leagues from this place."

"The hunt will take place, then, in the neighborhood?"

"The meeting-place is Yellowstone Plain."

"I shall not fail to be there, father. Ah! I am delighted, more than you can suppose, at the happy news you have brought me."

"All the better, my friend. Now, gentlemen, I will ask you to excuse me; for I feel so broken with fatigue that, with your permission, I will go and take a few hours' rest."

"I was a fool not to think of it before," Valentine exclaimed with vexation as he struck his forehead. "Pardon me, father."

"I thought for my brother," said Curumilla. "If my father will follow me all is ready."

The missionary thanked him with a smile and rose, bowed to all present, and, supported by Eagle-wing, he followed Curumilla into another chamber of the grotto. Father Seraphin found a bed of dry leaves covered with bear-skins, and a fire so arranged as to burn all night. The two Indians retired after bowing respectfully to the father, and assuring themselves that he needed nothing more.

After kneeling on the ground of the grotto, Father Seraphin laid himself on his bed of leaves, crossed his arms on his chest, and fell into that child-like sleep which only the just enjoy. After his departure Valentine bent over to his two friends.

"All is saved," he said in a low voice.

"How? Explain yourself," they eagerly answered.

"Listen to me. You will spend the night here: at daybreak you will start for the Farm accompanied by Father Seraphin."

"Good! What next?"

"General Ibanez will proceed, as from you, to the Governor, and invite him to a grand hunt of wild horses, to take place in three days."

"I do not understand what you are driving at."

"That is not necessary at this moment. Let me guide you; but above all arrange it so that all the authorities of the town accept your invitation and are present at the hunt."

"That I take on myself."

"Very good. You, General, will collect all the men you can, so that they can support you on a given signal, but hide themselves so that no one can suspect their presence."

"Very good," Don Miguel answered: "all shall be done as you recommend. But where will you be all this while?"

"You know very well," he answered with a smile of undefinable meaning. "I shall be hunting the buffalo with my friend Unicorn, the great chief of the Comanches."

Hastily breaking off the interview, the hunter wrapped himself in his buffalo-robe, stretched himself before the fire, closed his eyes, and slept, or feigned to sleep. After a few minutes' hesitation his friends imitated his example, and the grotto became calm and silent as on the day of the creation.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNICORN.

BEFORE retiring to rest, Father Seraphin, on the previous evening, had whispered a couple of words in the Indians' ears. The sun had scarce begun to rise a little above the extreme blue line of the horizon ere the missionary opened his eyes, and after a short

prayer hurried to the hall in which his companions had remained. The four men were still asleep, wrapped in their furs and buffalo-skins.

"Wake up, brothers," Father Seraphin said, "for day is appearing."

The four men started up in an instant.

It was a magnificent morning; thousands of birds, hidden beneath the foliage, saluted the birth of day with their harmonious songs; a fickle breeze poured through the branches, and refreshed the air; in the distance, as far as eye could extend, undulated the prairie, with its oceans of tall grass incessantly agitated by the hurried footfalls of the wild beasts returning to their dens. An hour later, Don Miguel, General Ibanez, and the missionary took leave of Valentine, and, mounted on their horses, which Curumilla had led to the entrance of the ravine, they started at a gallop in the direction of the Paso del Norte, whence they were about twenty leagues distant. Valentine and the two Indian chiefs remained behind.

"I am about to leave my brother," Eagle-wing said.

"Why not remain with us, chief?"

"My pale brother no longer requires Eagle-wing. The chief hears the cries of the men and women of his tribe who were cowardly assassinated, and demand vengeance."

"Where goes my brother?" the hunter asked, who was too thoroughly acquainted with the character of the Indians to try and change the warrior's determination, though he was vexed at his departure.

"The Comas dwell in villages on the banks of the Colorado. Eagle-wing is returning to his friends. He will ask for warriors to avenge his brothers who are dead."

Valentine bowed.

"May the Great Spirit protect my father!" he said. "The road is long to the villages of his tribe. The chief is leaving friends who love him."

"Eagle-wing knows it: he will remember," the chief said, with a deep intonation.

And, after pressing the hands the two hunters held out to him, he bounded on his horse, and soon disappeared in the windings of the canon. Valentine watched his departure with a sad and melancholy look.

"Shall I ever see him again?" he murmured. "He is an Indian: he is following his vengeance. It is his nature: he obeys it, and God will judge him. Every man must obey his destiny."

The hunter threw his rifle on his shoulder and started in his turn, followed by Curumilla. Valentine and his comrade were on foot: they preferred that mode of traveling, which seemed to them sure, and quite as quick as on horseback. The two men, after the Indian custom, walked one behind the other, not uttering a syllable; but toward mid-day the heat became so insupportable that they were obliged to stop to take a few moments' repose. At length the sunbeams lost their strength, the evening breeze rose, and the hunters could resume their journey. They soon reached the banks of the Rio Puerco (Dirty River,) which they began ascending, keeping as close as they could to the banks, while following the tracks made since time immemorial by wild animals coming down to drink.

The man unacquainted with the splendid American scenery will have a difficulty in imagining the imposing and savage majesty of the prairie the hunters were traversing. The river, studded with islets covered with cottonwood trees, flowed silent and rapid between banks of slight elevation, and overgrown with grass so tall that it obeyed the impulse of the wind, and for a great distance northward the ground was broadcast with large lumps of pebble resembling grave-stones.

At a few hundred yards from the river rose a conical mound, bearing on its summit a granite obelisk one hundred and twenty feet in height. The Indians, who, like all primitive nations, are caught by any thing strange, frequently assembled at this spot.

A great number of buffalo-skulls, piled up at the foot of the column, and arranged in circles, ellipses, and other geometrical figures, attest their piety for this god of the hunt, whose protecting spirit, they say, looks down from the top of the monolith. Here and there grew patches of the Indian potato, wild onion, prairie tomato, and those millions of strange flowers and trees composing the American flora. The rest of the country was covered with tall grass, continually undulating beneath the light footfall of the graceful antelopes or big-horns, which bounded from one rock to the other, startled by the approach of the travelers.

Far, far away on the horizon, mingled with the azure of the sky, appeared the denuded peaks of the lofty mountains that serve as unassailable fortresses to the Indians: their summits, covered with eternal snow, formed

the frame of this immense and imposing picture, which was stamped with a gloomy and mysterious grandeur.

At the hour when the *markawis* uttered its last song to salute the setting of the sun, which, half plunged in the purple of evening, still jaspered the sky with long red bands, the travelers perceived the tents of the Comanches picturesquely grouped on the sides of a verdurous hill. The Indians had, in a few hours, improvised a real village with their buffalo-skin tents, aligned to form streets and squares.

On arriving at about five hundred yards from the village the hunters suddenly perceived an Indian horseman. Evincing not the slightest surprise, they stopped and unfolded their buffalo-ropes, which floated in the breeze, as a signal of peace. The horseman uttered a loud cry. At this signal—for it was evidently one—a troop of Comanche warriors debouched at a gallop from the village, and poured like a torrent down the sides of the hill, coming up close to the motionless travelers, brandishing their weapons, and uttering their war-yell.

The hunters waited, carelessly leaning on their guns. Assuredly, to a man not acquainted with the singular manners of the prairie, this mode of reception would have seemed overt hostilities. But it was not so; for, on coming within range of the hunters, the Comanches began making their horses leap and curvet, and deploying right and left formed a vast circle, inclosing the two men.

Then a horseman quitted the group, dismounted, and rapidly approached the newcomers: the latter hastened to meet him. All three had their arms extended with the palm forward in sign of peace. The Indian who thus advanced to meet the hunters was Unicorn, the great chief of the Comanches.

As a distinctive sign of his race, his skin was of a red tinge, brighter than the palest new copper. He was a man of thirty at the most, with masculine and expressive features; his face possessed a remarkable intelligence, and was stamped with that natural majesty found among the savage children of the prairie; he was tall and well-built; and his muscular limbs evidenced a vigor and suppleness against which few men would have contended with advantage.

He was completely painted and armed for war: his black hair was drawn up on his head in the form of a casque, and fell down his back like a mane; a profusion of wampum collars, claws of grizzly bear, and buffalo-teeth adorned his breast, on which was painted with rare dexterity a blue tortoise, the distinctive sign of the tribe to which he belonged, and of the size of a hand.

The rest of his costume was composed of the *mitasses*, fastened round the hips by a leathern belt, and descending to the ankles; a deer-skin shirt, with long hanging sleeves, the seams of which, like those of the *mitasse*, were fringed with leather strips and feathers; a wide cloak, of the hide of a female buffalo, was fastened across his shoulders with a buckle of pure gold, and fell down to the ground; on his feet he had elegant moccasins of different colors, embroidered with beads and porcupine-quills, from the heels of which trailed several wolf-tails; a light round shield, covered with buffalo-hide, and decorated with human scalps, hung on his left side by his panther-skin quiver full of arrows. His weapons were those of the Comanche Indians; that is to say, the scalping-knife, the tomahawk, a bow, and an American rifle; but a long whip, the handle of which, painted red, was adorned with scalps, indicated his rank as chief.

When the three men were close together they saluted each other by raising their hands to their foreheads; then Valentine and Unicorn crossed their arms by passing the right hand over the left shoulder, and bowing their heads at the same time, kissed each other's mouth after the prairie fashion. Unicorn then saluted Curumilla in the same way; and this preliminary ceremony terminated, the Comanche chief took the word.

"My brothers are welcome at the village of my tribe," he said. "I was expecting them impatiently. I had begged the Chief of Prayer of the pale-faces to invite them in my name."

"He performed his promise last night. I thank my brother for having thought of me."

"The two stranger great hunters are friends of Unicorn. His heart was sad not to see them near him for the buffalo-hunt his young people are preparing."

"Here we are! We set out this morning at sunrise."

"My brothers will follow me, and rest at the council-fire."

The hunters bowed an assent. Each received a horse, and at a signal from Unicorn, who had placed himself between them, the troop started at a gallop, and returned to the village, which it entered to the deafen-

ing sounds of drums, *chikikoués*, shouts of joy from the women and children who saluted their return, and the furious barking of the dogs. When the chiefs were seated round the council-fire the pipe was lit, and ceremoniously presented to the two strangers, who smoked in silence for some minutes. When the pipe had gone the round several times, Unicorn addressed Valentine:

"Koutonepi is a great hunter," he said to him; "he has often followed the buffalo on the plains of the Dirty River. The chief will tell him the preparations he has made, that the hunter may give his opinion."

"It is needless, chief," Valentine replied. "The buffalo is the friend of the red-skins: the Comanches know all its stratagems. I should like to ask a question of my brother."

"The hunter can speak: my ears are open."

"How long will the chief remain on the hunting-grounds with his young men?"

"About a week. The buffaloes are suspicious: my young men are surrounding them, but they can not drive them in our direction before four or five days."

Valentine gave a start of joy.

"Good!" he said. "Is my brother sure of it?"

"Very sure."

"How many warriors have remained with the chief?"

"About four hundred: the rest are scattered over the plain to announce the approach of the buffaloes."

"Good! If my brother likes I will procure him a fine hunt within three days."

"Ah!" the chief exclaimed, "then my brother has started some game?"

"Oh!" Valentine answered with a laugh, "let my brother trust to me, and I promise him rich spoils."

"Good! Of what game does my brother speak?"

"Of *gachupinos*.* In two days they will meet in large numbers not far from here."

"Wah!" said the Comanche, whose eyes sparkled at this news, "my young men will hunt them. My brother must explain."

Valentine shook his head.

"My words are for the ears of a chief," he said.

Without replying, Unicorn made a signal: the Indians rose silently, and left the tent. Curumilla and Unicorn alone remained near the fire. Valentine then explained to the Comanche, in its fullest details, the plan he had conceived, in the execution of which the aid of the Indians was indispensable to him. Unicorn listened attentively without interrupting. When Valentine had ended:

"What does my brother think?" the latter asked, fixing a scrutinizing glance on the impassive countenance of the chief.

"Wah!" the other replied, "the pale-face is very crafty. Unicorn will do what he desires."

This assurance filled Valentine's heart with joy.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HUNT OF THE WILD HORSES.

DON MIGUEL ZARATE and his two friends did not reach the hacienda till late. They were received in the porch by Don Pablo and Donna Clara, who manifested great joy at the sight of the French missionary, for whom they felt a sincere esteem and great friendship. Spite of all his care, Fray Ambrosio had always seen his advances repelled by the young people, in whom he instinctively inspired that fear mingled with disgust that is experienced at the sight of a reptile. Donna Clara, who was very pious, carried this repulsion to such a pitch that she only confessed her faults and approached the holy table when Father Seraphin came to spend a few days at the hacienda.

Fray Ambrosio was too adroit to appear to notice the effect his presence produced on the children: he feigned to attribute to timidity and indifference on religious matters what was in reality a strongly-expressed loathing for himself personally. But in his heart a dull hatred fermented against the two young folk, and especially against the missionary, whom he had several times already attempted to destroy by well-laid snares. Father Seraphin had always escap-

* Wearers of shoes—a name given by the Indians to the Spaniards at the conquest.

ed them by a providential chance: but in spite of the chaplain's obsequious advances, and the offers of service he did not fail to overwhelm him with each time they met, the missionary had thoroughly read the Mexican monk. He had guessed what fearful corruption was hidden beneath his apparent simplicity and feigned piety; and while keeping to himself the certainty he had acquired, he remained on his guard, and carefully watched this man, whom he

suspected of incessantly planning some dark treachery against him.

Don Miguel left his children with the missionary, who immediately took possession of him and dragged him away, lavishing on him every possible attention. The hacendero retired to his study with General Ibanez, when the two men drew up a list of the persons they intended to invite—that is to say, the persons Valentine proposed to get out of the way, though they were innocent of his scheme. The General then mounted his horse, and rode off to deliver the invitations. For his part Don Miguel sent off a dozen peons and vaqueros in search of the wild horses, and to drive them gradually toward the spot chosen for the hunt.

General Ibanez succeeded perfectly: the invitations were gladly accepted, and the next evening the guests began arriving, Don Miguel receiving them with marks of the most profound respect and lavish hospitality.

The General Isturitz, Governor of Paso, Don Luciano Perez, and seven or eight persons of inferior rank, soon arrived at the hacienda. At sunrise a numerous party, composed of forty persons, proceeded, accompanied by a crowd of well-mounted peons, toward the meet. This was a vast plain on the banks of the Rio del Norte, where the wild horses were accustomed to graze at this season. The caravan produced the most singular and picturesque effect with the brilliant costumes of the persons who composed it, and their horses glittering with gold and silver. Starting at about four A. M. from the Farm, four hours later they reached a clump of trees, beneath whose shade tents had been raised and tables laid by Don Miguel's orders, so that they might breakfast before the hunt.

The riders, who had been journeying for four hours, exposed to the rays of the sun and the dust, uttered a shout of joy at the sight of the tents. Each dismounted; the ladies were invited to do the same, among them being the wife of General Isturitz, and Donna Clara, and they gayly sat down around the tables.

Toward the end of the breakfast Don Pablo arrived, who had gone the evening previously to join the vaqueros. He announced that the horses had been started, that a large drove was now crossing the Plain of the Coyotes, watched by the vaqueros, and that they must make haste if they wished to have good sport. This news augmented the ardor of the hunters. The ladies were left in camp under the guard of a dozen well-armed peons, and the whole party rushed at a gallop in the direction indicated by Don Pablo.

The Plain of the Coyotes extended for an enormous distance along the banks of the river. Here and there rose wooded hills, which varied the landscape that was rendered monotonous by the tall grass, in which the riders disappeared up to their waists. When the hunting-party reached the skirt of the plain, Don Miguel ordered a halt, that they might hold a council, and hear the report of the leader of the vaqueros.

The race of wild horses that nowadays people the deserts of North America, and especially of Mexico, is descended from Cortez' cavalry. Hence it is a pure breed, for at the period of the Spanish conquest only Arab horses were employed. These horses have multiplied in really an extraordinary manner. It is not rare to meet with manadas of twenty and even thirty thousand head. They are small, but gifted with an energy and vigor of which it is impossible to form a fair idea without having seen them. They accomplish without fatigue journeys of prodigious length. Their coat is the same as that of other horses, save that during winter it grows very long, and becomes frizzy like the wool of sheep. In spring this species of fur falls off. The horses may be easily trained. Generally, so soon as they find themselves caught, they easily submit to the saddle.

The leader made his report. A drove of about ten thousand head was two leagues off on the plain, quietly grazing in the company of a few elks and buffaloes. The hunters scaled a hill, from the top of which they easily saw on the horizon a countless mob of animals, grouped in the most picturesque way, and apparently not at all suspecting the danger that threatened them.

After the vaquero's report, Don Miguel and his friends held a council, and this is the resolution they came to. They formed what is called the grand circle of the wild horses; that is to say, the most skillful riders were echeloned in every direction at a certain distance from each other, so as to form an immense circle. The wild horses are extremely suspicious: their instinct is so subtle that the slightest breath of wind is sufficient to carry to them the smell of their enemies, and make them set off at headlong speed. Hence it is necessary to act with the great-

est prudence, and use many precautions, if a surprise is desired.

When all the preparations were made the hunters dismounted, and dragging their horses after them, glided through the tall grass so as to contract the circle. This maneuver had gone on for some time, and they had sensibly drawn nearer, when the drove began to display some signs of restlessness.

The horses, which had hitherto grazed calmly, raised their heads, pricked their ears, and neighed as they inhaled the air. Suddenly they collected, formed a compact band, and started at a trot in the direction of some cottonwood trees which stood on the banks of the river. The hunt was about to commence.

At a signal from Don Miguel six well-mounted vaqueros rushed at full speed ahead of the drove, making their lassoes whistle round their heads. The horses, startled by the apparition of the riders, turned back hastily, uttering snorts of terror, and fled in another direction. But each time they tried to force the circle, horsemen rode into the midst of them, and compelled them to turn back.

It is necessary to have been present at such a chase, to have seen this hunt on the prairies, to form an idea of the magnificent sight offered by all these noble brutes, their eyes afire, their mouths foaming, their heads haughtily thrown up, and their manes fluttering in the wind, as they bounded and galloped in the fatal circle the hunters had formed round them. There is in such a sight something intoxicating, which carries away the most phlegmatic, and renders them mad with enthusiasm and pleasure.

When this maneuver had lasted long enough, and the horses began to grow blinded with terror, at a signal given by Don Miguel the circle was broken at a certain spot. The horses rushed, with a sound like thunder, toward this issue which opened before them, overturning with their chests every thing that barred their progress. But it was this the hunters expected. The horses, in their mad race, galloped on without dreaming that the road they followed grew gradually narrower in front of them, and terminated in inevitable captivity.

Let us explain this termination of the hunt. The manada had been cleverly guided by the hunters toward the entrance of a canon, or ravine, which ran between two rather lofty hills. At the end of this ravine the vaqueros had formed, with stakes fifteen feet long, planted in the ground, and firmly fastened together with cords of twisted bark, an immense corral or inclosure, into which the horses rushed without seeing it. In less than no time the corral was full; then the hunters went to meet the manada, which they cut off at the risk of their lives, while the others closed the entrance of the corral. More than fifteen hundred magnificent wild horses were thus captured at one stroke.

The noble animals rushed with snorts of fury at the walls of the inclosure, trying to tear up the stakes with their teeth and dashing madly against them. At length they recognized the futility of their efforts, lay down, and remained motionless. In the mean while a tremendous struggle was going on in the ravine between the hunters and the rest of the manada. The horses confined in this narrow space made extraordinary efforts to open a passage and fly anew. They neighed, stamped, and flew at every thing that came within their reach. At length they succeeded in regaining their first direction, and rushed into the plain with the velocity of an avalanche. Several vaqueros had been dismounted and trampled on by the horses, and two of them had received such injuries that they were carried off the ground in a state of insensibility.

With all the impetuosity of youth, Don Pablo had rushed into the very heart of the manada. Suddenly his horse received a kick which broke its off fore leg, and it fell to the ground, dragging its rider with it. The hunters uttered a cry of terror and agony. In the midst of this band of maddened horses the young man was lost, for he must be trampled to death under their hoofs. But he rose with the rapidity of lightning, and quick as thought seizing the mane of the nearest horse, he leaped on its back, and held on by his knees. The horses were so pressed against one another that any other position was impossible. Then a strange thing occurred—an extraordinary struggle between the horse and its rider. The noble beast, furious at feeling its back dishonored by the weight it bore, bounded, reared, rushed forward; but all was useless, for Don Pablo adhered firmly.

So long as it was in the ravine, the horse, impeded by its comrades, could not do all it might have wished to get rid of the burden it bore; but so soon as it found itself on the plain it threw up its head, made several leaps on one side, and then started

forward at a speed which took away the young man's breath.

Don Pablo held on firmly by digging his knees into the panting sides of his steed: he unfastened his cravat, and prepared to play the last scene in this drama, which threatened to terminate in a tragic way for him. The horse had changed its tactics: it was racing in a straight line to the river, resolved to drown itself with its rider sooner than submit. The hunters followed with an interest mingled with terror the moving interludes of this mad race, when suddenly the horse changed its plans again, reared, and tried to fall back with its rider. The hunters uttered a shout of agony. Don Pablo clung convulsively to the animal's neck, and, at the moment it was falling back, he threw his cravat over its eyes with extraordinary skill.

The horse, suddenly blinded, fell back again on its feet, and stood trembling with terror. Then the young man dismounted, put his face to the horse's head, and breathed into its nostrils, while gently scratching its forehead. This operation lasted ten minutes at the most, the horse panting and snorting, but not daring to leave the spot. The Mexican again leaped on the horse's back, and removed the bandage: it remained stunned—Don Pablo had tamed it. Everybody rushed toward the young man, who smiled proudly, in order to compliment him on his splendid victory. He dismounted, gave his horse to a vaquero, who immediately passed a bridle round its neck, and then walked toward his father, who embraced him tenderly. For more than an hour Don Miguel had despaired of his son's life.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SURPRISE.

So soon as the emotion caused by Don Pablo's prowess was calmed, they began thinking about returning. The sun was descending in the horizon: the whole day had been spent with the exciting incidents of the chase. The Hacienda de la Noria was nearly ten leagues distant: it was, therefore, urgent to start as speedily as possible, unless the party wished to run the risk of bivouacking in the open air.

The men would easily have put up with this slight annoyance, which, in a climate like that of New Mexico, and at this season of the year, has nothing painful about it; but they had ladies with them. Left one or two leagues in the rear, they must feel alarmed in the absence of the hunters—an absence which, as so frequently happens when out hunting, had been protracted far beyond all expectations.

Don Miguel gave the vaqueros orders to brand the captured horses with his cipher; and the whole party then returned, laughing and singing, in the direction of the tents where the ladies had been left. The vaqueros who had served as beaters during the day remained behind to guard the horses.

In these countries, where there is scarce any twilight, night succeeds the day almost without transition. As soon as the sun had set, the hunters found themselves in complete darkness: for, as the sun descended on the horizon, the shade invaded the sky in equal proportions, and, at the moment when the day-planet disappeared, the night was complete. The desert, hitherto silent, seemed to wake up all at once: the birds, stupefied by the heat, commenced a formidable concert, in which joined at intervals, from the inaccessible depths of the forest, the snapping of the *carcajous*, and the barking of the coyotes mingled with the hoarse howling of the wild-beasts that had left their dens to come down and drink in the river.

Then gradually the cries, the songs, and the howling ceased, and nothing was audible save the hunters' horses on the pebbles of the road. A solemn silence seemed to brood over this abrupt and primitive scenery. At intervals the green tufts of the trees and the tall grass bowed slowly with a prolonged rustling of leaves and branches, as if a mysterious breath passed over them, and compelled them to bend their heads. There was something at once striking and terrible in the imposing appearance offered by the prairie at this hour of the night, beneath this sky studded with brilliant stars, which sparkled like emeralds, in the presence of this sublime immensity, which only suffered one voice to be heard—that of Deity.

The young and enthusiastic man to whom it is given to be present at such a spectacle feels a thrill run over all his body: he experiences an undefinable feeling of happiness and extraordinary pleasure on looking round him at the desert, whose unexplored depths conceal from him so many secrets, and display to him Divine Majesty in all its grandeur and omnipotence.

The hunters, so gay and talkative at the start, had yielded to this omnipotent influence of the desert, and advanced rapidly and silently, only exchanging a few syllables at lengthened intervals. The profoundest calm still continued to reign over the desert; and while, owing to the astonishing transparency of the atmosphere, the eye could embrace an enormous horizon, nothing suspicious was visible.

The fire-flies buzzed carelessly round the top of the grass, and the flickering fires burning before the tents to which the hunters were bound could be already seen about half a league ahead. At a signal from Don Miguel the party, which had, up to the present, only trotted, set out at a long canter; for each felt anxious to leave a scene which, in the darkness, had assumed a sinister aspect.

They thus arrived within a hundred yards of the fires, whose ruddy glow was reflected on the distant trees, when suddenly a fearful yell crossed the air, and from behind every bush out started an Indian horseman brandishing his weapons, and making his horse curvet round the white men, while uttering the war-cry. The Mexicans, taken unawares, were surrounded ere they had sufficiently recovered from their stupor to think about employing their weapons. At a glance Don Miguel judged the position: it was a critical one. The hunters were at the most but twenty; the number of Comanche warriors surrounding them was at least three hundred.

The Comanches and Apaches are the most implacable foes of the white race. In their periodical invasions of the frontiers they hardly ever make any prisoners: they mercilessly kill all who fall into their hands. Still the Mexicans rallied. Certain of the fate that awaited them, they were resolved to sell their lives dearly. There was a moment of supreme expectation before the commencement of the deadly combat, when suddenly an Indian galloped out of the ranks of the warriors, and rode within three paces of the little band. On arriving there he stopped, and waved his buffalo-robe in sign of peace. The Governor prepared to speak.

"Let me carry on the negotiations," Don Miguel said. "I know the Indians better than you do; and perhaps I shall succeed in getting out of this awkward position."

"Do so," the Governor answered.

General Ibanez was the only who had remained calm and impassive since the surprise: he did not make a move to seize his weapons; on the contrary, he crossed his arms carelessly on his chest, and took a mocking glance at his comrades, as he hummed a song. Don Pablo had placed himself by his father's side, ready to defend him at the peril of his life. The Indian chief took the word.

"Let the pale-faces listen," he said; "an Indian sacheem is about to speak."

"We have no time to spare in listening to the insidious words which you are preparing to say to us," Don Miguel replied in a haughty voice. "Withdraw, and do not obstinately bar our passage, or there will be blood spilt."

"The pale-faces will have brought it on themselves," the Comanche answered in a gentle voice. "The Indians mean no harm to the pale warriors."

"Why, then, this sudden attack? The chief is mad. We do not let ourselves be so easily deceived as he seems to suppose: we know very well that he wants our scalps."

"No; Unicorn wishes to make a bargain with the pale-faces."

"Come, chief, explain yourself: perhaps your intentions are as you describe them. I do not wish to reproach myself with having refused to listen to you."

The Indian smiled.

"Good!" he said. "The great white chief is becoming reasonable. Let him listen, then, to the words Unicorn will pronounce."

"Go on, chief; my comrades and myself are listening."

"The pale-faces are thieving dogs," the chief said in a rough voice; "they carry on a continual war with the red-skins, and buy their scalps as if they were peltry; but the Comanches are magnanimous warriors, who disdain to avenge themselves. The squaws of the white men are in their power: they will restore them."

At these words a shudder of terror ran along the ranks of the hunters; their courage failed them; they had only one desire left—that of saving those who had so wretchedly fallen into the hands of these blood-thirsty men.

"On what conditions will the Comanches restore their prisoners?" Don Miguel asked, whose heart was contracted at the thought of his daughter, who was also a prisoner. He secretly cursed Valentine whose fatal

advice was the sole cause of the frightful evil that assailed him at this moment.

"The pale-faces," the chief continued, "will dismount and arrange themselves in a line. Unicorn will choose from his enemies those whom he thinks proper to carry off as prisoners; the rest will be free, and all the women restored."

"Those conditions are harsh, chief. Can you not modify them?"

"A chief has only one word. Do the pale-faces consent?"

"Let us consult together for a few moments at any rate."

"Good! Let the white men consult. Unicorn grants them ten minutes," the chief made answer.

And turning his horse, he went back to his men. Don Miguel then addressed his friends.

"Well, what do you think of what has occurred?"

The Mexicans were terrified: still they were compelled to allow that the conduct of the Indians was extraordinary, and that they had never before evinced such lenity. Now that reflection had followed on the first feeling of excitement, they understood that a struggle against enemies so numerous was insensate, and could only result in rendering their position worse than it was before, and that the chief's conditions, harsh as they were, offered at least some chance of safety for a portion of them, and the ladies would be saved.

This last and all-powerful consideration decided them. Don Miguel had no occasion to convince them of the necessity of submission. Whatever struggle it cost them, they dismounted and arranged themselves in line, as the chief had demanded, Don Miguel and his son placing themselves at the head.

Unicorn, with that cool courage characteristic of the Indians, then advanced alone toward the Mexicans, who still had their weapons, and who, impelled by their despair, and at the risk of being all massacred, would have sacrificed him to their vengeance. The chief had also dismounted. With his hands crossed on his back, and frowning brow, he now commenced his inspection.

Many a heart contracted at his approach, for a question of life and death was being decided for those hapless men: only the perspective of the atrocious tortures which menaced the ladies could have made them consent to this humiliating and degrading condition. The Unicorn, however, was generous: he only selected eight of the Mexicans, and the rest received permission to mount their horses, and leave the fatal circle that begirt them. Still, by a strange accident, or premeditation of which the reason escaped them, these eight prisoners—among whom were the Governor, General Isturitz, and the criminal judge, Don Luciano Perez—were the most important personages in the party, and the members of the Provincial Government.

It was not without surprise that Don Miguel observed this: the Comanches, however, faithfully fulfilled their compact, and the ladies were at once set at liberty. They had been treated with the greatest respect by the Indians, who had surprised their camp, and seized them almost in the same way as they had the hunters; that is to say, the camp was invaded simultaneously on all sides. It was a matter worthy of remark in an ambuscade that not a drop of blood had been spilt.

After the moments given up to the happiness of seeing his daughter again safe and sound, Don Miguel resolved to make a last attempt with Unicorn in favor of the unhappy men who remained in his hands. The chief listened with deference, and let him speak without interruption; then he replied, with a smile whose expression the other tried in vain to explain:

"My father has Indian blood in his veins; the red-skins love him: never will they do him an injury. Unicorn would like to restore him immediately the prisoners, for whom he cares very little; but that is impossible. My father himself would speedily regret Unicorn's obedience to his wish; but, in order to prove to my father how much the chief desires to do a thing that will be agreeable to him, the prisoners will not be ill-treated, and will be let off with a few days' annoyance. Unicorn consents to accept a ransom for them, instead of making them slaves. My father can himself tell them this good news."

"Thanks, chief," Don Miguel answered. "The nobility of your character touches my heart: I shall not forget it. Be persuaded that, under all circumstances, I shall be happy to prove to you how grateful I am."

The chief bowed gracefully and withdrew, in order to give the hacendero liberty to communicate with his companions. The lat-

ter were seated sadly on the ground, gloomy and downcast. Don Miguel repeated to them the conversation he had held with Unicorn, and the promise he had made with respect to them. This restored them all their courage; and, with the most affectionate words and marks of the liveliest joy, they thanked him for the attempt he had made in their favor.

In fact, thanks to the promise of liberating them for a ransom at the end of a week, and treating them well during the period of their captivity, there was nothing so very terrifying about the prospect; and it was one of those thousand annoyances to which men are exposed by accident, but whose proportions had been so reduced in their eyes, that, with the carelessness which forms the staple of the national character, they were the first to laugh at their mishap.

Don Miguel, however, was anxious to retire; so he took leave of his companions, and rejoined the chief. The latter repeated his assurance that the prisoners should be free within a week, if they consented each to pay a ransom of one thousand piastres, which was a trifle. He assured the hacendero that he was at liberty to withdraw whenever he pleased, and he should not oppose his departure.

Don Miguel did not allow the invitation to be repeated. His friends and himself immediately mounted their horses, together with the ladies, who were placed in the center of the detachment; and after taking leave of Unicorn, they dug their spurs into their horses, and started at a gallop, glad to have got off so cheaply. The camp-fires were soon left far behind them, and General Ibanez then approached his friend, and, bending down to his ear, whispered:

"Don Miguel, can the Comanches be our allies? I fancy that they have this night given a bold push to the success of our enterprise."

This thought, like a ray of light, had already crossed the proprietor's brain several times.

"I do not know," he said, with a clever smile; "but at any rate, my dear General, they are very adroit foes."

The little band continued to advance rapidly toward the hacienda, which was now no great distance, and which they hoped to reach before sunrise. The events we have described had occurred in less than an hour.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MEETING.

"By Jove!" General Ibanez said, "it must be confessed that these red devils have done us an immense service without suspecting it. It might be said, deuce take me, that they acted under a knowledge of facts. This Unicorn, as the chief is called, is a precious man in certain circumstances. I am anxious to cultivate his acquaintance, for no one knows what may happen. It is often good to have so intelligent a friend as him at hand."

"You are always jesting, General. When will you be serious for once?" Don Miguel said, with a smile.

"What would you have, my friend? We are at this moment staking our heads in a desperate game, so let us at any rate keep our gayety. If we are conquered, it will be time enough then to besad, and make bitter reflections about the instability of human affairs."

"Yes, your philosophy is not without a certain dose of fatalism, which renders it more valuable to me. I am happy to see you in this good temper, especially at a moment when we are preparing to play our last card."

"All is not desperate yet, and I have a secret foreboding, on the contrary, that all is for the best. Our friend the Trail-Hunter, I feel convinced, has something to do, if not all, with what has happened to us."

"Do you believe it?" Don Miguel asked, quickly.

"I am certain of it. You know as well as I do these Indios Bravos, and the implacable hatred they have vowed against us. The war they wage with us is atrocious; and for them to be suddenly changed from wolves into lambs requires some powerful motive to make them act thus. People do not lay aside in a moment a hatred which has endured for ages. The Comanches, by the choice they made, know the importance of the prisoners they have seized. How is it that they consent so easily to give them up for a triding ransom? There is some inexplicable mystery in all this."

"Which is very easy to explain, though," a laughing voice interrupted from behind the shrubs.

The two Mexicans started, and checked their horses. A man leaped from a thicket, and suddenly appeared in the center of the

track the little band of hunters was following. The latter, believing in a fresh attack and treachery on the part of the Comanches, seized their weapons.

"Stop!" Don Miguel said, sharply, "the man is alone. Let me speak with him."

Each waited with his hand on his weapon.

"Hold!" Don Miguel continued, addressing the stranger, who stood motionless, carelessly resting on his gun. "Who are you, my master?"

"Do you not recognize me, Don Miguel? and must I really tell you my name?" the stranger answered, with a laugh.

"The Trail-hunter!"

"Himself," Valentine continued. "Hang it all! you take a long time to recognize your friends."

"You will forgive us when you know all that has happened to us, and how much we must keep on our guard."

"Confound it!" Valentine said, laughing, as he regulated his pace by the trot of the horses, "do you fancy you are going to tell me any news? Did you not really suspect from what quarter the blow came?"

"What!" Don Miguel exclaimed in surprise, "did you—?"

"Who else but I? Do you think the Spaniards are such friends of the Indians that the latter would treat them so kindly when meeting them face to face in the desert?"

"I was sure of it," General Ibanez affirmed.

"I guessed it at the first moment."

"Good heavens! nothing was more simple. Your position, through Red Cedar's treachery, was most critical. I wished to give you the time to turn round by removing, for a few days, the obstacles that prevented the success of your plans. I have succeeded, I fancy."

"You could not have managed better," exclaimed the General.

"Oh!" Don Miguel said, with a reproachful accent, "why did you hide it from me?"

"For a very simple reason, my friend. I wished that in these circumstances your will and conscience should be free."

"But—"

"Let me finish. Had I told you of my plan, it is certain that you would have opposed it. You are a man of honor, Don Miguel: your heart is most loyal."

"My friend—"

"Answer me. Had I explained to you the plan I formed, what would you have done?"

"Well—"

"Answer frankly."

"I should have refused."

"I was sure of it. Why would you have done so? Because you would never have consented to violate the laws of hospitality, and betray enemies you sheltered beneath your roof, though you knew all the while that these men, on leaving you, would have considered it their duty to seize you, and that they watched your every movement while sitting by your side, and eating at your table. Is it not so?"

"It is true: my honor as a gentleman would have revolted. I could not have suffered such horrible treachery to be carried out under my very eyes."

"There! you see that I acted wisely in saying nothing to you. In that way your honor is protected, your conscience easy, and I have in the most simple fashion freed you for some days from your enemies."

"That is true: still—"

"What? Have the prisoners to complain of the way in which they have been treated?"

"Not at all; on the contrary, the Comanches, and Unicorn in particular, treated them most kindly."

"All is for the best, then. You must congratulate yourself on the unexpected success you have achieved, and must now profit by it without delay."

"I intend to do so."

"You must act at once."

"I ask nothing better. All is ready. Our men are warned, and they will rise at the first signal."

"It must be given immediately."

"I only ask the time to leave my daughter at home; then, accompanied by my friends, I will march on Paso, while General Ibanez, at the head of a second band, seizes Santa Fé."

"The plan is well conceived. Can you count on the persons who follow you?"

"Yes; they are all my relatives or friends."

"All for the best. Let us not go further. We are here at the place where the roads part: let your horses breathe awhile, and I will tell you a plan I have formed, and which, I think, will please you."

The small party halted. The horsemen dismounted, and lay down on the grass. As all knew of the conspiracy formed by Don Miguel, and were his accomplices in different degrees, this halt did not surprise them,

for they suspected that the moment for action was not far off, and that their chief doubtless wished to take his final measures before throwing off the mask, and proclaiming the independence of New Mexico. On inviting them to hunt the wild horses, Don Miguel had not concealed from them Red Cedar's treachery, and the necessity in which he found himself of dealing a great blow if he did not wish all to be hopelessly lost.

Valentine led the hacendero and the General a short distance apart. When they were out of ear-shot the hunter carefully examined the neighborhood; then within a few minutes rejoined his friends, whom his way of acting considerably perplexed.

"Friends," he said to them, "what do you intend doing? In your position minutes are ages. Are you ready to make your pronunciamiento?"

"Yes," they answered.

"This is what I propose. You, Don Miguel, will proceed direct on Paso. At about half a league from that town you will find Curumilla, with twenty of the best rifles on the frontier. These men, in whom you can trust, are Canadian and Indian hunters devoted to me. They will form the nucleus of a band sufficient for you to seize on Paso without striking a blow, as it is only defended by a garrison of forty soldiers. Does that plan suit you?"

"Yes; I will set about it at once. But my daughter—"

"I will take charge of her. You will also leave me your son, and I will convey them both to the hacienda. As for the other ladies, on reaching the town they will merely go to their homes, which, I fancy, presents no difficulty."

"None."

"Good! Then that is settled?"

"Perfectly."

"As for you, General, your men have echeloned by my care in parties of ten and twenty along the Santa Fé road, up to two leagues of the city, so that you will only have to pick them up. In this way you will find yourself, within three hours, at the head of five hundred resolute and well-armed men."

"Why, Valentine, my friend," the General said, laughing, "do you know there is the stuff in you to make a partisan chief, and that I am almost jealous of you?"

"Oh! you would be wrong, General: I assure you I am most disinterested in this affair."

"Well, my friend, I know it: you are a free desert hunter, caring very little for our paltry schemes."

"That is true; but I have vowed to Don Miguel and his family a friendship which will only terminate with my life. I tremble for him and his children when I think of the numberless dangers that surround him, and I try to aid him as far as my experience and activity permit me. That is the secret of my conduct."

"This profession of faith was, at least useless, my friend. I have known you too intimately and too long to have the least doubt of your intentions. Hence, you see, I place such confidence in you, that I accept your ideas without discussion, so convinced am I of the purity of your intentions."

"Thanks, Don Miguel: you have judged me correctly. Come, gentlemen, to horse, and start. We must separate here—you, Don Miguel, to proceed by the right-hand track to Paso; you, General, by the left-hand one to Santa Fé; while I, with Don Pablo and his sister, proceed straight on till we reach the hacienda."

"To horse, then!" Don Miguel shouted, resolutely; "and may God defend the right!"

"Yes," the General added; "for from this moment the revolution is commenced."

The three men returned to their friends. Don Miguel said a few words to his children, and in an instant the whole party were in the saddle.

"The die is cast!" Valentine exclaimed.

"May heaven keep you, gentlemen!"

"Forward!" Don Miguel commanded.

"Forward!" General Ibanez shouted, as he rushed in the opposite direction.

Valentine looked after his departing friends. Their black outlines were soon blended with the darkness, and then the footfalls of their horses died out in the night. Valentine gave a sigh and raised his head.

"God will protect them," he murmured; then turning to the two young people, "Come on, children," he said.

They started, and for some minutes kept silence. Valentine was too busy in thought to address his companions; and yet Dona Clara and Don Pablo, whose curiosity was excited to the highest pitch, were burning to question him. At length the girl, by whose side the hunter marched with that quick step which easily keeps up with a horse bent down to him.

"My friend," she said to him in her soft voice, "what is taking place? Why has my father left us, instead of coming to his house?"

"Yes," Don Pablo added, "he seemed agitated when he parted from us. His voice was stern, his words sharp. What is happening, my friend? Why did not my father consent to my accompanying him?"

Valentine hesitated to answer.

"I implore you, my friend," Dona Clara continued, "do not leave us in this mortal anxiety. The announcement of a misfortune would certainly cause us less pain than the perplexity in which we are."

"Why force me to speak, my children?"

the hunter answered in a saddened voice. "The secret you ask of me is not mine. If your father did not impart his plans to you, it was doubtless because weighty reasons oppose it. Do not force me to render you more sorrowful by telling you things you ought not to know."

"But I am not a child," Don Pablo exclaimed. "It seems to me that my father ought not to have thus held his confidence from me."

"Do not accuse your father, my friend," Valentine answered, gravely: "probably he could not have acted otherwise."

"Valentine, Valentine! I will not accept those poor reasons," the young man urged. "In the name of our friendship I insist on your explaining yourself."

"Silence!" the hunter suddenly interrupted him. "I hear suspicious sounds around us."

The three travelers stopped and listened, but all was quiet. The house was about five hundred yards at the most from the spot where they halted. Don Pablo and Dona Clara heard nothing, but Valentine made them a sign to remain quiet: then he dismounted and placed his ear to the ground.

"Follow me," he said. "Something is happening here which I can not make out; but it alarms me."

The young people obeyed without hesitation; but they had only gone a few paces when Valentine stopped again.

"Are your weapons loaded?" he sharply asked Don Pablo.

"Yes."

"Good! Perhaps you will have to make use of them."

All at once the gallop of a horse urged to its utmost speed was audible.

"Attention!" Valentine muttered.

Still the horseman, whoever he might be, rapidly advanced in the direction of the travelers, and soon came up to them. Suddenly Valentine bounded like a panther, seized the horse by the bridle, and stopped it dead.

"Who are you, and where are you going?" he shouted, as he put a pistol-barrel against the stranger's chest.

"Heaven be praised!" the latter said, not replying to the question. "Perhaps I shall be able to save you. Fly, fly, in all haste!"

"Father Seraphin!" Valentine said with stupor, as he lowered his pistol. "What has happened?"

"Fly, fly!" the missionary repeated, who seemed a prey to the most profound terror.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ABDUCTION.

RED CEDAR and Fray Ambrosio had not remained inactive since their last interview up to the day when Don Miguel set out to hunt the wild horses. These two fellows, so suited to understand each other, had maneuvered with extreme skill. Fray Ambrosio, all whose avaricious instincts had been aroused since he had so artfully stolen from poor Joaquin the secret of the placer, had assembled a formidable collection of the bandits who always swarm on the Indian frontiers. In a few days he found himself at the head of one hundred and twenty adventurers, all men who had cheated the gallows, and of whom he felt the more sure as the secret of the expedition was concealed from them, and they fancied they formed a war-party engaged to go scalp-hunting.

These men, who all knew Red Cedar by reputation, burned to set out, so convinced were they of carrying out a successful expedition under such a leader. Only two men formed an exception to this band of scoundrels. They were Harry and Dick, who, for reasons the reader has doubtless guessed, found themselves, to their great regret, mixed up with these bandits. Still we must say, in justice to Fray Ambrosio's soldiers, that they were all bold hunters, accustomed for many a year to desert life, who knew all its perils, and feared none of its dangers.

Fray Ambrosio, apprehending the effects of too much liquor on his men, had made

them bivouac at the entrance of the desert, at a sufficiently great distance from the town to prevent them easily going there. The adventurers spent their time joyously in playing, not for money, as they had none, but for the scalps they intended presently to lift from the Indians, each of which represented a very decent sum. Still Fray Ambrosio, so soon as his expedition was completely organized, had only one desire—to start as speedily as possible; but for two days Red Cedar was not to be found. At length Fray Ambrosio succeeded in catching him just as he was entering his cabin.

"What has become of you?" he asked him.

"What does that concern you?" the squatter answered brutally. "Have I to answer for my conduct to you?"

"I do not say so: still, connected as we are at this moment, it would be as well for me to know where to find you."

"I have been attending to my business, as you have to yours."

"Well, are you satisfied?"

"Very much so," he answered with a sinister smile. "You will soon learn the result of my journey."

"All the better. If you are satisfied, I am so too."

"Ah, ah!"

"Yes, all is ready for departure."

"Let us be off—to-morrow if you like."

"Or this very night."

"Very good. You are like me, and don't care to travel by day on account of the heat of the sun."

The two accomplices smiled at this delicate jest.

"But before starting," the squatter continued, becoming serious again, "we have something left to do here."

"What is it?" Fray Ambrosio asked with candor.

"It is wonderful what a short memory you have. Take care: that failing may play you an awkward trick some day."

"Thanks! I will try to correct it."

"Yes, and the sooner the better: in the mean while I will refresh your memory."

"I shall feel obliged to you."

"And Dona Clara, do you fancy we are going to leave her behind?"

"Hum! Then you still think of that?"

"By Jove! more than ever."

"The fact is it will not be easy to carry her off at this moment."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, she is not at the hacienda."

"That is certainly a reason."

"Is it not?"

"Yes; but she must be somewhere, I suppose?" the squatter said with a coarse laugh.

"She has gone with her father to a hunt of wild horses."

"The hunt is over, and they are on their return."

"You are well informed."

"It is my trade. Come, do you still mean serving me?"

"I must."

"That is how I like you. There can not be many people at the hacienda?"

"A dozen at the most."

"Better still. Listen to me: it is now four in the afternoon. I have a ride to take. Return to the hacienda, and I will come there this evening at nine, with twenty resolute men. You will open the little gate of the corral, and leave me to act. I will answer for all."

"If you wish it, it must be so," Fray Ambrosio said with a sigh.

"Are we going to begin again?" the squatter asked in a menacing voice as he rose.

"No, no, it is unnecessary," the monk exclaimed. "I shall expect you."

"Good: till this evening."

On which the two accomplices separated. All happened as had been arranged between them. At nine o'clock Red Cedar reached the little gate, which was opened for him by Fray Ambrosio, and the squatter entered at the head of his three sons and a party of bandits. The peons, surprised in their sleep, were bound before they even knew what was taking place.

"Now," Red Cedar said, "we are masters of the place, the girl can come as soon as she likes."

"Eh?" the monk went on. "All is not finished yet. Don Miguel is a resolute man, and is well accompanied: he will not let his daughter be carried off under his eyes without defending her."

"He will not come," the squatter said with a sardonic grin.

"How do you know?"

"That is not your business."

"We shall see."

But the bandits had forgotten Father Seraphin. The missionary, aroused by the un-

usual noise he heard, had hastily risen. He had heard the few words exchanged between the accomplices, and they were sufficient to make him guess the fearful treachery they meditated. Only listening to his heart, the missionary glided out into the corral, saddled a horse, and opening a door, of which he had a key, so that he could enter or leave the hacienda as his duties required, he started at full speed in the direction which he supposed the hunters must follow in returning to the estate. Unfortunately Father Seraphin had been unable to effect his flight unheard by the squatter's practiced ears.

"Malediction!" Red Cedar shouted as he rushed, rifle in hand, toward a window, which he dashed out with his fist, "we are betrayed."

The bandits rushed in disorder into the corral where their horses were tied up, and leaped into their saddles. At this moment a shadow flitted across the plain in front of the squatter, who rapidly shouldered his rifle and fired. Then he went out; a stifled cry reached his ear, but the person the bandit had fired at still went on.

"No matter," the squatter muttered; "that fine bird has lead in its wing. Sharp, sharp, my men, on the trail!"

And all the bandits rushed off in pursuit of the fugitive.

Father Seraphin had fallen in a fainting condition at Valentine's feet.

"Good heavens!" the hunter exclaimed in despair, "what can have happened?"

And he gently carried the missionary into a ditch that ran by the side of the road. Father Seraphin had his shoulder fractured, and the blood poured in a stream from the wound. The hunter looked around him; but at this moment a confused sound could be heard like the rolling of distant thunder.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Red Cedar," gasped Father Seraphin.

"We must fall like brave men, Don Pablo," Valentine said sharply.

Dona Clara was pale and trembling.

"Come," Valentine said.

And, with a movement rapid as thought, he bounded on to the missionary's horse. The three fugitives started at full speed. This flight lasted a quarter of an hour, and then Valentine stopped. He dismounted, gave the young people a signal to wait, lay down on the ground, and began crawling on his hands and knees through the long grass that concealed him, and stopping at intervals to listen attentively to the sounds of the desert. Suddenly he rushed toward his companions, seized their horses by the bridle, and dragged them behind a mound, where they remained concealed, breathless and unable to speak.

A formidable noise of horses was audible. Some twenty black shadows passed like a tornado within ten paces of their hiding-place, not seeing them in consequence of the darkness. Valentine drew a deep breath.

"All hope is not lost," he muttered.

He waited anxiously for five minutes: their pursuers were going further and further away. Presently the sound of their horses' hoofs ceased to disturb the silence of the night.

"To horse!" Valentine said.

They leaped into their saddles and started again, not in the direction of the hacienda, but in that of the Paso.

"Loosen your bridles," the hunter said: "more still, more still—we are not moving."

Suddenly a loud neigh was borne on the breeze to the ears of the fugitives.

"We are lost!" Valentine muttered.

"They have found our trail."

Red Cedar was too old a hand on the prairie to be long thrown out: he soon perceived that he was mistaken, and was now turning back, quite certain this time of holding the trail. Then began one of those fabulous races which only the dwellers on the prairie witness—races which intoxicate and cause a giddiness, and which no obstacle is able to stop or check, for the object is success or death. The bandits' half-wild horses, apparently identifying themselves with the ferocious passions of their riders, glided through the night with the rapidity of the phantom steed in the German ballad, bounded over precipices, and rushed on with prodigious speed.

At times a horseman rolled with his steed from the top of a rock, and fell into an abyss, uttering a yell of distress; but his comrades passed over his body, borne along like a whirlwind, and responding to this cry of agony, the final appeal of a brother, by a formidable howl of rage. This pursuit had already lasted two hours, and the fugitives had not lost an inch of ground: their horses, white with foam, uttered hoarse cries of fatigue and exhaustion as a dense smoke came out of their nostrils. Dona Clara, with her hair untied and floating in the breeze, with sparkling eye and closely press-

ed lips, constantly urged her horse on with voice and hand.

"All is over!" the hunter suddenly said. "Save yourselves! I will let myself be killed here, so that you may go on for ten minutes longer, and be saved. I will hold out for that time, so go on."

"No," Don Pablo answered nobly; "we will be all saved or perish together."

"Yes," the maiden remarked.

Valentine shrugged his shoulders.

"You are mad," he said.

All at once he started, for their pursuers were rapidly approaching.

"Listen," he said. "Do you two let yourselves be captured: they will not follow me, as they owe me no grudge. I swear to you that if I remain at liberty I will deliver you, even if they hide you in the bowels of the earth."

Without replying Don Pablo dismounted, and the Trail-hunter leaped on his horse.

"Hope for the best!" he shouted, hoarsely, and disappeared.

Don Pablo, so soon as he was alone with his sister, made her dismount, seated her at the foot of a tree, and stood before her with a pistol in either hand. He had not to wait long, for almost immediately he was surrounded by the bandits.

"Surrender!" Red Cedar shouted, in a panting voice.

Don Pablo smiled disdainfully.

"Here is my answer," he said. And with two pistol-shots he laid two bandits low; then he threw away his useless weapons, and crossing his arms on his breast, said:

"Do what you please now: I am avenged."

Red Cedar bounded with fury.

"Kill that dog!" he shouted.

Shaw rushed toward the young man, threw his nervous arms around him, and whispered in his ear:

"Do not resist, but fall as if dead."

Don Pablo mechanically followed his advice.

"It is all over," said Shaw. "Poor fellow, he did not cling to life."

He returned his knife to his belt, threw the supposed corpse over his shoulders, and dragged it into a ditch. At the sight of her brother's body, whom she supposed to be dead, Clara uttered a shriek of despair and fainted. Red Cedar laid the maiden across his saddle-bow, and the whole band, starting at a gallop, was soon lost in the darkness. Don Pablo then rose slowly, and took a sorrowful glance around.

"My poor sister!" he murmured.

Then he perceived her horse near him.

"Valentine alone can save her," he said.

He mounted the horse, and proceeded toward the town, asking himself this question, which he found it impossible to answer:

"But why did not that man kill me?" And then he recalled what Shaw had once promised him.

A few paces from the village he perceived two men jailing on the road, and conversing with the greatest animation. They hurriedly advanced toward him, and the young man uttered a cry of surprise on recognizing them. They were Valentine and Curumilla.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE REVOLT.

DON MIGUEL ZARATE had marched rapidly on the Paso; an hour after leaving Valentine he saw flashing in the distance the lights that shone in the village windows. The greatest calmness prevailed in the vicinity: only at times could be heard the barking of the dogs baying at the moon, or the savage miaowing of the wild-cats hidden in the shrubs. At about one hundred yards from the village a man suddenly rose before the small party.

"Who goes there?" he shouted.

"Don Miguel Zarate."

At these words twenty men hidden in the brushwood rose suddenly, and throwing their rifles on their shoulders, advanced to meet the horsemen. They were the hunters commanded by Curumilla, who, by Valentine's orders, were awaiting the hacendero's arrival to join him.

"Well," Don Miguel asked the Indian chief, "is there any thing new?"

Curumilla shook his head.

"Then we can advance?"

"Yes."

"What is the matter, chief? Have you seen any thing alarming?"

"No; and yet I have a feeling of treachery."

"How so?"

"I can not tell you. Apparently every thing is as usual: still there is something which is not so. Look you, it is scarce ten o'clock: generally at that hour all the saloons are crammed with gamblers and

drinkers, the streets flocked with promenaders. This night there is nothing of the sort: all is closed—the town seems abandoned. This tranquillity is factitious. I am alarmed, for I hear the silence. Take care."

Don Miguel was involuntarily struck by the chief's remarks. He had known Curumilla for a long time. He had often seen him display in the most dangerous circumstances a coolness and contempt for death beyond all praise: hence some importance must be attached to the apprehensions and anxiety of such a man. The hacendero ordered his party to halt, assembled his friends, and held a council. All were of opinion that, before venturing to advance further, they should send as scout a clever man to traverse the town, and see for himself if the fears of the Indian chief were well founded.

One of the hunters offered himself. The conspirators concealed themselves on either side the road, and awaited, lying in the shrubs, the return of their messenger. He was a half-breed, Simon Munez by name, to whom the Indians had given the sobriquet of "Dog-face," owing to his extraordinary likeness to that animal. This name had stuck to the hunter, who had been compelled to accept it. He was short and clumsy, but endowed with marvelous strength; and we may say at once that he was an emissary of Red Cedar, and had only joined the hunters in order to betray them.

When he left the conspirators he proceeded toward the village whistling. He had scarce taken a dozen steps into the first street ere a door opened, and a man appeared. This man stepped forward and addressed the hunter.

"You whistle very late, my friend."

"I whistle to wake those who are asleep," the half-breed made answer.

"Come in," the man continued.

Dog-face went in, and the door closed upon him. He remained in the house half an hour, then went out, and hurried back along the road he had traversed.

Red Cedar, who wished before all to avenge himself on Don Miguel Zarate, had discovered, through Fray Ambrosio, the conspirators' new plan. Without loss of time he had taken his measures in consequence, and had managed so well that, although the General, the Governor, and the criminal judge were prisoners, Don Miguel must succumb in the contest he was preparing to provoke. Fray Ambrosio, to his other qualities, joined that of being a listener at doors. In spite of the distrust which his patron was beginning to display toward him on Valentine's recommendation, he had surprised a conversation between Don Miguel and General Ibanez. This conversation, immediately reported to Red Cedar, who, according to his usual custom, had appeared to attach no importance to it, had been sufficient, however, to make the squatter prepare his batteries and counter-mine the conspiracy.

"Dog-face rejoined his companions after an hour's absence.

"Well?" Don Miguel asked him.

"All is quiet," the half-breed answered; "the inhabitants have retired to their houses, and everybody is asleep."

"You noticed nothing of a suspicious nature?"

"I went through the town from one end to the other, and saw nothing."

"We can advance then?"

"In all security: it will only be a promenade."

On this assurance the conspirators regained their courage, Curumilla was treated as a visionary, and the order was given to advance. Still Dog-face's report, far from dissipating the Indian chief's doubts, had produced the contrary effect, and considerably augmented them. Saying nothing, he placed himself by the hunter's side, with the secret intention of watching him closely.

The plan of the conspirators was very simple. They would march directly on the Cabildo (Town-hall), seize it, and proclaim a Provisional Government. Under present circumstances nothing appeared to be easier. Don Miguel and his band entered the Paso, and nothing occurred to arouse their suspicions. It resembled that town in the "Arabian Nights," in which all the inhabitants, struck by the wand of the wicked enchanter, sleep an eternal sleep. The conspirators advanced into the town with their rifle-barrels thrust forward, with eye and ear on the watch, and ready to fire at the slightest alarm: but nothing stirred. As Curumilla had observed, the town was too quiet. This tranquillity hid something extraordinary, and must conceal the tempest. In spite of himself Don Miguel felt a secret apprehension which he could not master.

To some Don Miguel will perhaps appear a poor conspirator without foresight or any

great connection in his ideas. From our point of view that is possible; but in a country like Mexico, which counts its revolutions by hundreds, and where *pronunciamientos* take place, in most cases, without sense or reason, because a colonel wishes to become a General, or a lieutenant a captain, things are not regarded so closely; and the hacendero, on the contrary, had evidenced tact, prudence, and talent in carrying out a conspiracy which, during the several years it had been preparing, had only come across one traitor. And now it was too late to turn back: the alarm had been given, and the Government was on its guard. They must go onward, even if they succumbed in the struggle.

In the mean while the conspirators advanced. They had nearly reached the heart of the town: they were at this moment in a little, dirty, and narrow street, when suddenly a dazzling light illumined the darkness; torches flashed from all the windows; and Don Miguel saw that the two ends of the street in which he was were guarded by strong detachments of cavalry.

"Treachery!" the conspirators shouted in terror.

Curumilla bounded on Dog-face, and buried his knife between his shoulders. The half-breed fell in a lump, quite dead and not uttering a cry. Don Miguel judged the position at the first glance: he saw that he and his party were lost.

"Let us die!" he said.

"We will!" the conspirators responded.

Curumilla with the butt of his rifle beat in the door of the nearest house, and rushed in, the conspirators following him. They were soon intrenched on the roof. In Mexico all the houses have flat roofs, formed like terraces. Thanks to the Indian chief's idea, the rebels found themselves in possession of an improvised fortress, where they could defend themselves for a long time, and sell their lives dearly.

The troops advanced from each end of the street, while the roofs of all the houses were occupied by soldiers. The battle was about to begin between earth and heaven, and promised to be terrible. At this moment General Guerrero, who commanded the troops, bade them halt, and advanced alone to the house on the top of which the conspirators were intrenched. Don Miguel beat up the guns of his comrades, who aimed at the officer.

"Wait," he said to them; and, addressing the General, "What do you want?" he shouted.

"To offer you propositions."

"Speak."

The General came a few paces nearer, so that those he addressed could not miss one of his words.

"I offer you life and liberty if you consent to surrender your leader," he said.

"Never!" the conspirators shouted in one voice.

"It is my place to answer," Don Miguel said; and then turning to the General, "What assurance do you give me that these conditions will be honorably carried out?"

"My word of honor as a soldier," the General answered.

"Very good," Don Miguel went on; "I accept. All the men who accompany me will leave the town one after the other."

"No, we will not!" the conspirators shouted, as they brandished their weapons; "we would sooner die."

"Silence!" the hacendero said in a loud voice. "I alone have the right to speak here, for I am your chief. The life of brave men like you must not be needlessly sacrificed. Go, I say: I order you—I implore it of you," he added with tremor in his voice. "Perhaps you will soon take your revenge." The conspirators hung their heads mournfully.

"Well?" the General asked.

"My friends accept. I will remain alone here. If you break your word I will kill myself."

"I repeat that you hold my word," the General answered.

The conspirators came one after the other to embrace Don Miguel, and then went down into the street without being in any way interfered with. Things happen thus in this country, where conspiracies and revolutions are the order of the day, as it were. The defeated are spared as far as possible, for the simple reason that the victors may find themselves to-morrow fighting side by side with them for the same cause. Curumilla was the last to depart.

"All is not ended yet," he said to Don Miguel. "Koutonepl will save you, father."

The hacendero shook his head sadly.

"Chief," he said in a deeply-moved voice, "I leave my daughter to Valentine, Father Seraphin, and yourself. Watch over her: the poor child will soon have no father."

Curumilla embraced Don Miguel silently

and retired: he had soon disappeared in the crowd, the General having honorably kept his word. Don Miguel threw down his weapons and descended.

"I am your prisoner," he said.

General Guerrero bowed, and made him a sign to mount the horse a soldier had brought up.

"Where are we going?" the hacendero said.

"To Santa Fé," the General answered, "where you will be tried with General Ibanez, who will doubtless soon be a prisoner like yourself."

"Oh!" Don Miguel muttered thoughtfully, "who betrayed us this time?"

"It was still Red Cedar," the General answered.

The hacendero let his head sink on his chest, and remained silent. A quarter of an hour later the prisoner left the Paso del Norte, escorted by a regiment of dragoons. When the last trooper had disappeared in the windings of the road, three men left the shrubs that concealed them, and stood like three phantoms in the midst of the desolate plain.

"Oh heavens!" Don Pablo cried in a heart-rending voice, "my father, my sister—who will restore them to me?"

"I!" Valentine said in a grave voice, as he laid his hand on his shoulder. "Am I not the TRAIL-HUNTER?"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE THREE PLOTTERS.

ABOUT a month after the events we have described, two horsemen, well mounted, and carefully enwrapped in their cloaks, entered at a smart trot the town of Santa Fé between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

Santa Fé, the capital of New Mexico, is a pretty town, built in the midst of a laughing and fertile plain. One of its sides occupies the angle formed by a small stream: it is surrounded by the *adobe* walls of the houses by which it is bordered. The entrance of each street is closed by stakes in the form of palisades; and like the majority of towns in Spanish America, the houses, built only one-story high in consequence of the earthquakes, are covered with terraces of well-beaten earth, which are a sufficient protection in this glorious climate, where the sky is constantly pure.

In the time of the Castilian rule, Santa Fé enjoyed a certain importance, owing to its strategic position, which allowed an easy defense against the incursions of the Indians; but since the emancipation of Mexico this city, like all the other centers of population in this unhappy country, has seen its splendor vanish forever. In a word, this city, which fifty years back contained more than ten thousand inhabitants, has now scarcely three thousand, eaten up by fevers and the utmost wretchedness.

During the last few weeks Santa Fé had appeared to emerge, as if by magic, from the lethargy into which it is ordinarily plunged; a certain degree of animation prevailed in its usually deserted streets. The fact was, an event of immense importance had recently taken place in this town. The two leaders of the conspiracy lately attempted had been transferred to safe-keeping at Santa Fé.

The Mexicans, ordinarily so slow when justice has to be dealt, are the most expeditious people in the world when a conspiracy has to be punished. Don Miguel and General Ibanez had not pined long in prison. A court-martial, hurriedly convened, had assembled, under the presidency of the Governor, and the two conspirators were unanimously condemned to be shot.

The hacendero, through his name and position, and especially on account of his fortune, had numerous partisans in the province: hence the announcement of the verdict had caused a profound stupor, which almost immediately changed into anger, among the rich land-owners and the Indians of New Mexico. A dull agitation prevailed throughout the country; and the Governor, who felt too weak to hold head against the storm that threatened him, and regretted that he had carried matters so far, was temporizing, and trying to evade the peril of his position until a regiment of dragoons he had asked of the Government arrived, and gave strength to the law. The condemned men, whom the Governor had not yet dared to execute, were still provisionally detained in the prison.

The two men of whom we have spoken rode without stopping through the streets of the town, deserted at this hour, when everybody is at home enjoying his siesta, and proceeded toward an unpretending rancho, built on the banks of the stream at the opposite end of the town from that by which they entered.

"Well," one of the horsemen said, addressing his comrade, "was I not right? You see every one is asleep: there is nobody to watch us. We have arrived at a capital moment."

"Bah!" the other answered in a rough voice, "do you believe that? In towns there is always somebody watching to see what does not concern him, and report it after his fashion."

"That is possible," the first said, shrugging his shoulders disdainfully. "I care about it as little as I do for a string-halt horse."

"And I too," the other said sharply. "Do you imagine that I care more than you do for the gossip? But stay; I fancy we have reached the rancho of Andres Garote. This must be the filthy tenement, unless I am mistaken."

"It is the house. I only hope the scamp has not forgotten the meeting I gave him. Wait a minute, *senor padre*; I will give the agreed-on signal."

"It is not worth while, Red Cedar. You know that I am always at your excellency's orders when you may please to give them," a mocking voice said from inside the rancho, the door of which immediately opened to give admission to the new-comers, and allowed a glimpse of the tall figure of Andres Garote himself.

The travelers dismounted and entered the rancho.

Andres took the bridle of the horses and led them to the corral, where he unsaddled them and gave each a truss of alfalfa.

The travelers, fatigued by a long journey, sat down on butacas arranged against the wall, and awaited the host's return, while wiping their dark foreheads and twisting a maize cigarette between their fingers. The room in which they were had nothing extremely attractive about it. It was a large chamber with two windows, protected by iron bars, the greasy panes allowing but a doubtful light to pass. The naked and smoky walls were covered with clumsily-painted pictures, representing various holy objects. The furniture only consisted of three or four halting-tables, the same number of benches, and a few butacas, the holey and harsh leather of which evinced lengthened use. As for the floor it was of beaten earth, but rendered uneven by the mud incessantly brought in upon the feet of visitors. A door carefully closed led to an inner room, in which the ranchero slept. Another door was opposite to it, and through this Andres speedily entered after giving the horses their provender.

"I did not expect you yet," he said, as he entered; "but you are welcome. Is there any thing new?"

"My faith, I know nothing but the affair that brings us. It is rather serious, I fancy, and prevents us attending to any thing else," Red Cedar remarked.

"*Caspita!* what vivacity, *compadre!*" Andres exclaimed. "But, before talking, I hope you will take some refreshment at any rate. There is nothing like a cup of mezeal to clear the brain."

"Not to forget," Fray Ambrosio said, "that it is infernally hot, and my tongue is glued to my palate, as I have swallowed so much dust."

Andres went to look for a bottle among several others arranged on a sort of a bar, and placed it before the travelers.

The liquor, liberally poured out, was swallowed at a draught by the three men, who put their glasses on the table with a "hum" of satisfaction, and that clicking of the tongue peculiar to toppers when they are swallowing any thing that tickles their throat.

"And now suppose we talk seriously," Red Cedar said.

"At your orders," Andres replied. "Still, if you prefer a hand at monte, you know that I have cards at your service."

"Presently, *Senor Andres*, presently. Every thing will have its turn. Let us first settle our little business," Fray Ambrosio judiciously observed.

Andres Garote bowed his head in resignation, while thrusting back into his pocket the pack of cards he had already half drawn out. The three men made themselves as comfortable as they could, and Red Cedar, after casting a suspicious glance around him, at length took the word.

"You know," he said, "how, when we thought we had nothing to do but proceed straight to Apacheria, the sudden desertion of nearly all our men checked us. The position was most critical for us, and the abduction of Dona Clara compelled us to take the utmost precautions."

"That is true," Andres Garote observed, with an air of conviction.

"Although certain influential persons protect us under the rose," Red Cedar continued, "we are compelled to keep in the shade as far as we can. I therefore sought

to remedy the gravest points in the business. In the first place, the girl was hidden in an inaccessible retreat, and then I began looking for comrades to take the place of those who abandoned us so suddenly."

"Well?" the two men interrupted him, sharply.

"At this moment," Red Cedar calmly continued, "when the placers of California call away all the men belonging to the profession, it was certainly no easy task to collect one hundred men of the sort we want, the more so as we shall have to fight the *Indios Bravos* in our expedition. I did not care to enlist novices, who, at sight of the first Apache or Comanche savages, would bolt in terror, and leave us in the lurch on the prairies. What I wanted were resolute men, whom no fatigue would disgust, and who, once attached to our enterprise, would follow it out to the end. I have, therefore, during the past month, been running about to all the frontier presidios; and the devil has come to my help tolerably well, for the evil is now repaired, and the band complete."

"I hope, Red Cedar," Fray Ambrosio asked, "that you have not spoken about the placer to your men?"

"Do you take me for a fool? No," the squatter answered, sharply, "no, no. A hundred thousand reasons urge us to be prudent, and keep the expedition secret. An indiscretion would ruin us now, when the whole world only dreams of mines and placers, and Europe sends us a mob of lean and starving vagabonds greedy to grow fat at our expense."

"Famously reasoned," said Andres.

"No, no, trust to me. I have assembled the finest collection of men ever brought together for an expedition, all food for the gallows, ruined by monte, who do not care for hard blows, and on whom I can fully count, while being very careful not to drop a word that can enlighten them as to the spot whither we propose leading them; for, in that case, I know as well as you do that they would abandon us without the slightest scruples, or, as is even more probable, assassinate us to gain possession of the immense treasures we covet."

"Nothing can be more just," Fray Ambrosio answered. "I am quite of your opinion, Red Cedar. Now, what have you resolved on?"

"We have not an instant to lose," the squatter continued. "This very evening, or to-morrow at the latest, we must set out. Who knows whether we have not already delayed our start too long? Perhaps one of those European vagabonds may have discovered our placer, for those scoundrels have a peculiar scent for gold."

Fray Ambrosio cast a suspicious glance at his partner.

"Hum!" he muttered, "that would be very unlucky, for hitherto the business has been well managed."

"For that reason," Red Cedar hastened to add, "I only suggest a doubt—nothing more."

"Come, Red Cedar," the monk said, "you have yourself narrated all the embarrassments of our position, and the countless difficulties we shall have to surmount before reaching our object. Why, then, complicate the gravity of our situation still more, and create fresh enemies needlessly?"

"I do not understand you. Be good enough to explain yourself more clearly."

"I allude to the young girl you carried off."

"Ah, ah!" Red Cedar said, with a grin, "is that where the shoe pinches you, comrade? I am vexed at it; but I will not answer your question. If I carried off that woman, it was because I had pressing reasons to do so. These reasons still exist: that is all I can tell you. All the better if these explanations are sufficient for you; if not, you must put up with them, for you will get no others."

"Still it appears to me that, regarding the terms on which we stand to each other—"

"What can there be in common between the abduction of Dona Clara and the discovery of a placer in the heart of Apacheria? Come, you are mad, Fray Ambrosio: the mezeal is getting to your head."

"Still—" the monk insisted.

"Enough of that!" Red Cedar shouted as he roughly smote the table with his clenched fist. "I will not hear another word on the subject."

At this moment two smart blows were heard on the carefully-bolted door.

The three men started, and Red Cedar broke off.

"Shall I open?" Andres asked.

"Yes," Fray Ambrosio answered: "hesitation or refusal might give an alarm. We must foresee every thing."

Red Cedar consented with a toss of his head, and the ranchero went with an ill

grace toward the door, which was being struck as if about to be beaten in.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CROSS CUT.

So soon as the door was opened two men appeared on the threshold. The first was Curumilla; the other, wrapped up in a large cloak, and with his broad-brimmed hat drawn over his eyes, entered the room, making the Indian chief a sign to follow him. He was evidently a Mexican.

"What shall I serve to your excellencies?" asked Andres.

"A bottle of mezel," the stranger said.

The new-comers seated themselves at a table at the end of the room, at a spot which the light reached in such a weakened state that it was almost dark. When they were served, each poured out a glass of liquor, which he drank; and leaning his head on his hands, the Mexican appeared plunged in deep thought, not occupying himself the least in the world about the persons near him. Curumilla crossed his arms on his chest, half closed his eyes, and remained motionless.

Still the arrival of these two men, especially the presence of the stranger, had suddenly frozen the eloquence of our three friends. Gloomy and silent, they instinctively felt that the new-comers were enemies, and anxiously waited for what was about to occur. At length Red Cedar, doubtless more impatient than his comrades, and wishful to know at once what he had to expect, rose, filled his glass, and turned toward the strangers.

"Strangers," he said, imitating that exquisite politeness which the Mexicans possess in the highest degree, "I have the honor of drinking to your health."

At this invitation Curumilla remained insensible as a granite statue; his companion slowly raised his head, fixed his eye for a moment on the speaker, and answered in a loud and firm voice:

"It is needless, for I shall not drink yours. What I say to you," he added, laying a stress on the words, "your friends can also take for themselves if they think proper."

Fray Ambrosio rose violently.

"What do you say?" he exclaimed in a threatening voice. "Do you mean to insult me?"

"There are people whom a man can not mean to insult," the stranger continued in a cutting voice. "Remember this, *senor padre*—I do not wish to have any dealings with you."

"Why so?"

"Because I do not please—that is all. Now, gentlemen, do not trouble yourselves about me, I beg, but continue your conversation: it was most interesting when I arrived. You were speaking, I believe, about an expedition you are preparing: there was a question too, I fancy, when I entered, about a girl your worthy friend, or partner—I do not know which he is—carried off with your assistance. Do not let me disturb you. I should, on the contrary, be delighted to learn what you intend doing with that unhappy young creature."

No words could render the feeling of stupor and terror which seized on the three partners at this crushing revelation of their plans. When they fancied they had completely concealed them by their cunning and skill, to see them thus suddenly unveiled in all their extent by a man they did not know, but who knew them, and in consequence was their enemy—this terrified them to such a degree that for a moment they fancied they had to do with the spirit of evil. The two Mexicans crossed themselves simultaneously, while the squatter uttered a hoarse exclamation of rage.

But Red Cedar and Fray Ambrosio were men too hardened in iniquity for any event, however grave in its nature, to crush them for long. The first moment past, they recovered themselves, and amazement gave way to fury. The monk drew from his boot a knife, and posted himself before the door to prevent egress; while Red Cedar, with frowning brow and a dagger in his hand, advanced resolutely toward the table, behind which their bold adversary, standing with folded arms, seemed to defy them by his ironical smile.

"Whoever you may be," Red Cedar said, stopping two paces from his opponent, "chance has made you master of a secret that kills, and you shall die."

"Do you really believe that I owe a knowledge of your secrets to chance?" the other said with a mocking accent.

"Defend yourself, Red Cedar howled furiously, "if you do not wish me to assassinate you; for, I shall not hesitate, I warn you."

"I know it," the stranger replied quietly.

"I shall not be the first person to whom that has happened: the Sierra Madre have often heard the agonizing cries of your victims, when Indians were wanting to fill up your number of scalps."

At this allusion to his frightful trade the squatter felt a livid pallor cover his face, a tremor agitated all his limbs, and he yelled in a choking voice:

"You lie! I am a hunter."

"Of scalps," the stranger immediately retorted, "unless you have given up that lucrative and honorable profession since your last expedition to the village of the Coras."

"Oh!" the squatter shouted with an indescribable burst of fury, "he is a coward who hides his face while uttering such words."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and let the folds of his mantle fall sharply.

"Do you not recognize me, Red Cedar, since your conscience has not yet whispered my name to you?"

"Oh!" the three men exclaimed in horror, and instinctively recoiling, "Don Pablo de Zarate!"

"Yes," the young man continued, "Don Pablo who has come, Red Cedar, to ask of you an account of his sister, whom you carried off."

Red Cedar was in a state of extraordinary agitation: with eyes dilated by terror, and contracted features, he felt the cold perspiration beading on his temples at this unexpected apparition.

"Ah!" he said in a hollow voice, "do the dead, then, leave the tomb?"

"Yes," the young man shouted loudly, "they leave their tomb to tear your victims from you. Red Cedar, restore me my sister!"

The squatter leaped like a hyena on the young man, brandishing his knife.

"Dog!" he yelled, "I will kill you a second time."

But his wrist was suddenly seized by a hand of iron, and the bandit tottered back to the walls of the rancho, against which he was forced to lean, lest he should roll on the ground. Curumilla, who had hitherto remained an impassive witness of the scene that took place before him, thought the moment for interference had arrived, and had sharply hurled him back. The squatter, with blood-shot eyes, and lips clenched by rage, looked around him with glaring worthy of a wild beast. Fray Ambrosio and the ranchero, held in check by the Indian chief, did not dare to interfere. Don Pablo walked with a slow and measured step toward the bandit. When he was ten paces from him he stopped, and looked fixedly at him.

"Red Cedar," he repeated in a calm voice, "give me back my sister."

"Never!" the squatter answered in a voice choked by rage.

In the mean while the monk and Andres had treacherously approached the young man, watching for the propitious moment to fall on him. The five men assembled in this room offered a strange and sinister scene by the uncertain light that filtered through the windows, as each stood with his hand on his weapon, ready to kill or be killed, and only waiting the opportunity to rush on his enemy. There was a moment of supreme silence. Assuredly these men were brave. In many circumstances they had seen death under every aspect; and yet their hearts beat as if to burst their breasts, for they knew that the combat about to commence between them was without truce or mercy. At length Don Pablo spoke again.

"Take care, Red Cedar," he said. "I have come to meet you alone and honorably. I have asked you for my sister several times, and you have not answered; so take care."

"I will sell your sister to the Apaches!" the squatter howled. "As for you, accursed one, you shall not leave this room alive."

"The scoundrel is mad!" the young man said contemptuously.

He fell back a pace, and then stopped.

"Listen," he continued. "I will now retire, but we shall meet again; and war to you then, for I shall be as pitiless to you as you have been to me. Farewell!"

"Oh! you shall not go in that way, my master," replied the squatter, who had regained all his boldness and impudence. "Did I not tell you I would kill you?"

The young man fixed upon him a glance of undefinable expression, and crossed his arms boldly on his chest.

"Try it," he said, in a voice rendered harsh by the fury boiling in his heart.

Red Cedar uttered a yell of rage, and bounded on Don Pablo. The latter calmly awaited the attack; but, so soon as the squatter was within reach, he suddenly took off his mantle, and threw it over his enemy's head, who, blinded by the folds of the thick garment, rolled about on the ground, unable to free himself from the accursed cloth that held him like a net. With one bound

the young man was over the table and troubling himself no further about Red Cedar, proceeded toward the door.

At this moment Fray Ambrosio rushed upon him, trying to bury his knife in his chest. Feeling not the slightest alarm, Don Pablo seized his assailant's wrist, and with a strength he was far from anticipating, twisted his arm so violently that his fingers opened, and he let the knife fall with a yell of pain. Don Pablo picked it up, and seized the monk by the throat.

"Listen, villain!" he said to him. "I am master of your life. You betrayed my father, who took pity on you, and received you into his house. You dishonor the gown you wear by your connection with criminals, whose ill deeds you share in. I could kill you, and perhaps ought to do so; but it would be robbing the executioner to whom you belong, and cheating the garrote which awaits you. This gown, of which you are unworthy, saves your life; but I will mark you so that you shall never forget me."

And placing the point of the knife on the monk's face, he made two gashes in the shape of a cross.

"We shall meet again!" he added, in a thundering voice, as he threw the knife away in disgust.

Andres Garote had not dared to make a move: terror nailed him motionless to the ground beneath the implacable eye of the Indian warrior. Don Pablo and Curumilla then rushed from the room and disappeared, and ere long the hoofs of two horses departing at full speed from the town could be heard clattering over the pavement.

By the aid of the ranchero Red Cedar presently succeeded in freeing himself from the folds of the cloak that embarrassed him. When the three accomplices found themselves alone again an expression of impotent rage and deadly hatred distorted their faces.

"Oh!" the squatter muttered, grinding his teeth, and raising his fist to heaven, "I will be revenged."

"And I too," said Fray Ambrosio in a hollow voice, as he wiped away the blood that stained his face.

"Hm! I do not care," Andres Garote said to himself aside. "That family of the Zarates is a fine one; but, it must be confessed that Don Pablo is a rough fellow."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HUNTERS.

At about two leagues from Santa Fé, in a clearing situated on the banks of the stream which borders that town, and on the evening of the same day, a man was seated before a large fire, which he carefully kept up, while actively engaged in making preparations for supper. A frugal meal, at any rate, this supper! It was composed of a buffalo-hump, a few potatoes, and maize tortillas baked on the ashes, the whole washed down with pulque.

The night was gloomy. Heavy black clouds coursed athwart the sky, at times intercepting the sickly rays of the moon, which only shed an uncertain light over the landscape, which was itself buried in one of those dense mists that, in equatorial countries, exhale from the ground after a hot day. The wind blew violently through the trees, whose branches came in contact, with plaintive moans; and in the depths of the woods the mewing of the wild-cats was mingled with the snarl of the coyotes and the howls of the pumas and jaguars. All at once the sound of galloping horses could be heard in the forest, and two riders burst into the clearing. On seeing them the hunter uttered an exclamation of joy, and hurried to meet them. They were Don Pablo and Curumilla.

"Heaven be praised!" he said. "Here you are at last. I was beginning to grow alarmed at your long absence."

"You see that nothing has happened to me," the young man answered, affectionately pressing the hunter's hands.

Don Pablo had dismounted, and hobbled his own horse and Curumilla's near Valentine's, while the Indian chief busied himself in preparing the supper.

"Come, come," the hunter said, gayly, "to table. You must be hungry, and I am dying of hunger. You can tell me all that has occurred while we are eating."

The three men went to the table; that is, they seated themselves on the grass in front of the fire, and vigorously assailed their meager repast.

"Now," Valentine asked presently, "what have you done? I fancy you remained much longer than was necessary in that accursed town."

"We did, my friend. Certain reasons forced me to remain longer than I had first intended."

"Proceed in regular order, if you have no

objection. I fancy that is the only way of understanding each other."

"Act as you please, my friend."

"Very good: the chief and I will light our pipes while you make your cigarette. We will sit with our backs to the fire, so as to watch the neighborhood, and in that way can converse without apprehension. What do you say, Pablo?"

"You are always right, my friend. Your inexhaustible gaiety, your honest carelessness, restore me all my courage, and make me quite a different man."

"Huh!" Valentine said, "I am glad to hear you speak so. The position is serious, it is true; but it is far from being desperate. The chief and I have many times been in situations where our lives only depended on a thread; and yet we always emerged from them honorably—did we not, chief?"

"Yes," the Indian answered, laconically, drawing in a mouthful of smoke, which he sent forth again from mouth and nostrils.

"But that is not the question of the moment. I have sworn to save your father and sister, Pablo, and will do so, or my carcass shall be food for the wild beasts of the prairie; so leave me to act. Have you seen Father Seraphin?"

"Yes, I have. Our poor friend is still very weak and pale, and his wound is scarce healed. Still, paying no heed to his sufferings, and deriving strength from his unbounded devotion to humanity, he has done all we agreed on. For the last week he has only left my father to hasten to his judges. He has seen the General, the Governor, the Bishop—everybody, in short—and has neglected nothing. Unfortunately all his exertions have hitherto been fruitless."

"Patience!" the hunter said, with a smile of singular meaning.

"Father Seraphin believes for certain that my father will be shot within two days. The Governor wishes to have done with it—that is the expression he employed: and Father Seraphin told me that we have not a moment to lose."

"Two days are a long time, my friend: before they have elapsed many things may have occurred."

"That is true; but my father's life is at stake, and I feel timid."

"Good, Don Pablo; I like to hear you speak so. But reassure yourself: all is going on well, I repeat."

"Still, my friend, I believe it would be wise to take certain precautions. Remember it is a question of life or death, and we must make haste. How many times, under similar circumstances, have the best-arranged plans failed! Do you think that your measures are well taken? Do you not fear lest an unhappy accident may derange all your plans at the decisive moment?"

"We are playing at this moment a deep game, my friend," Valentine answered. "We have chance on our side; that is to say, the greatest power that exists, and which governs the world."

The young man lowered his head, as if but slightly convinced. The hunter regarded him for a moment with a mixture of interest and tender pity, and then continued in a soothing voice:

"Listen, Don Pablo-de Zarate," he said. "I have said that I will save your father, and mean to do so. Still I wish him to leave the prison in which he now is, like a man of his character ought to leave it, in open day, greeted by the applause of the crowd, and not by escaping furtively during the night, like a vile criminal. Hang it all! do you think it would have been difficult for me to enter the town, and effect your father's escape by filing the bars or bribing the jailer? I would not do it. Don Miguel would not have accepted that cowardly and shameful flight. Your father shall leave his prison, but begged to do so by the Governor himself, and all the authorities of Santa Fé. So regain your courage, and no longer doubt a man whose friendship and experience should, on the contrary, restore your confidence."

The young man had listened to these words with ever increasing interest. When Valentine ceased speaking he seized his hand.

"Pardon me, my friend," he answered him. "I know how devoted you are to my family; but I suffer, and grief renders me unjust. Forgive me."

"Child, let us forget it all. Was the town quiet to-day?"

"I can not tell you, for I was so absorbed in thought that I saw nothing going on around me. Still I fancy there was a certain agitation, which was not natural, on the Plaza Mayor, near the Governor's palace."

Valentine indulged once again in that strange smile that had already played round the corners of his delicate lips.

"Good!" he said. "And did you, as I advised, try to gain any information about Red Cedar?"

"Yes," he answered with a start of joy, "I did; and I have positive news."

"Ah, ah! How so?"

"I will tell you."

And Don Pablo described the scene that had taken place in the rancho. The hunter listened to it with the utmost attention, and when it was finished he tossed his head several times with an air of dissatisfaction.

"All young people are so," he muttered: "they always allow their passions to carry them beyond the bounds of reason. You were wrong, extremely wrong, Don Pablo," he then added. "Red Cedar believed you dead, and that might have been of great use to us presently. You do not know the immense power that demon has at his disposal: all the bandits on the frontier are devoted to him. Your outbreak will be most injurious to your sister's safety."

"Still, my friend—"

"You acted like a madman in arousing the slumbering fury of a tiger. Red Cedar will persist in destroying you. I have known the wretch for a long time. But that is not the worst you have done."

"What is it, then?"

"Why, madman as you are, instead of keeping dark, watching your enemies without saying a word—in short, seeing through their game—by an unpardonable act of bravado you have unmasked all your batteries."

"I do not understand you, my friend."

"Fray Ambrosio is a villain of a different stamp from Red Cedar, it is true; but I consider him even a greater scoundrel than the scalp-hunter. At any rate, the latter is purely a rogue, and you know what to expect from him: all about him bears the stamp of his hideous soul. Had you stabbed that wild beast, who perspires blood by every pore, and dreams of naught but murder, I might possibly have pardoned you; but you have completely failed, not only in prudence, but in good sense, by acting as you have done with Fray Ambrosio. That man is a hypocrite. He owes all to your family, and is furious at seeing his treachery discovered. Take care, Don Pablo. You have made at one blow two implacable enemies: the more terrible now because they have nothing to guard against."

"It is true," the young man said; "I acted like a fool. But what would you? At the sight of those two men, when I heard from their very lips the crimes they had committed, and those they still meditate against us, I was no longer master of myself. I entered the rancho, and you know the rest."

"Yes, yes, the cuchillada was a fine one. Certainly the bandit deserved it; but I fear lest the cross you so smartly drew on his face will cost you dearly some day."

"Well, let us leave it in the hands of heaven. You know the proverb, 'It is better to forget what can not be remedied.' Provided my father escape the fate that menaces him, I shall be happy. I shall take my precautions to defend myself."

"Did you learn nothing further?"

"Yes: Red Cedar's gambusinos are encamped a short distance from us. I know that their chief intends starting to-morrow at the latest."

"Oh, oh! already? We must make haste and prepare our ambuscade, if we wish to discover the road they mean to follow."

"When shall we start?"

"At once."

The three men made their preparations; the horses were saddled, the small skins the horseman always carries at his saddle-bow in these dry countries were filled with water, and five minutes later the hunters mounted. At the moment they were leaving the clearing a rustling of leaves was heard, the branches parted, and an Indian appeared. It was Unicorn, the great sachem of the Comanches. On seeing him the three men dismounted and waited. Valentine advanced alone to meet the Indian.

"My brother is welcome," he said. "What does he want of me?"

"To see the face of a friend," the chief answered, in a gentle voice.

The two men then bowed after the fashion of the prairie. After this ceremony Valentine went on:

"My father must approach the fire, and smoke from the calumet of his white friends."

"I will do so," Unicorn answered.

And drawing near the fire, he crouched down in Indian fashion, took his pipe from his belt, and smoked in silence. The hunters, seeing the turn this unexpected interview was taking, had fastened up their horses, and seated themselves again round the fire. A few minutes passed thus, no one speaking, each waiting till the Indian chief should explain the motive of his coming. At length Unicorn shook the ashes from his calumet, returned it to his belt, and addressed Valentine.

"Is my brother setting out to hunt buffaloes again?" he said. "There are many this year on the prairies of the Rio Gila."

"Yes," the Frenchman replied, "we are going hunting. Does my brother intend to accompany us?"

"No; my heart is sad."

"What means the chief? Has any misfortune happened to him?"

"Does my brother understand me, or am I really mistaken? Is it that my brother only really loves the buffaloes, whose meat he eats, and whose hides he sells at the *tolderia*?"

"Let my brother explain himself more clearly; then I will try to answer him."

There was a moment of silence. The Indian seemed to be reflecting deeply: his nostrils were dilated, and at times his black eye flashed fire. The hunters calmly awaited the issue of this conversation, whose object they had not yet caught. At length Unicorn raised his head, restored all the serenity to his glance, and said in a soft and melodious voice:

"Why pretend not to understand me, Koutonepi? A warrior must not have a forked tongue. What a man can not do alone, two can attempt and carry out. Let my brother speak: the ears of a friend are open."

"My brother is right. I will not deceive his expectations. The hunt I wish to make is serious. I am anxious to save a woman of my color; but what can the will of one man effect?"

"Koutonepi is not alone: I see at his side the best two rifles of the frontier. What does the white hunter tell me? Is he no longer the great warrior I knew? Does he doubt the friendship of his brother the great sachem of the Comanches?"

"I never doubted the friendship of my brother. I am an adopted son of his nation. At this very moment is he not seeking to do me a service?"

"That service is only half what I wish to do. Let my brother speak the word, and two hundred Comanche warriors shall join him to deliver the virgin of the pale-faces, and take the scalps of her ravishers."

Valentine started with joy at this noble offer.

"Thanks, chief," he said, eagerly. "I accept; and I know that your word is sacred."

"Michabou protects us," the Indian said. "My brother can count on me. A chief does not forget a service. I owe obligations to the pale hunter, and I will deliver to him the robbers."

"Here is my hand, chief: my heart has long been yours."

"My brother speaks well. I have done what he requested of me."

And bowing courteously, the Comanche chief withdrew without adding a word.

"Don Pablo," Valentine exclaimed, joyously, "I can now guarantee your father's safety: this night—perhaps to-morrow—he will be free."

The young man fell into the hunter's arms, and hid his head on his honest chest, not having the strength to utter a word. A few minutes later the hunters left the clearing to go in search of the gambusinos, and prepare their ambuscade.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SUNBEAM.

We will now go a little way back, in order to clear up certain portions of the conversation between Valentine and Unicorn, whose meaning the reader can not have caught.

Only a few months after the arrival in Apacheria the Frenchman and Curumilla were hunting the buffalo on the banks of the Rio Gila. It was a splendid day in the month of July. The two hunters, fatigued by a long march made under the beams of the parching sun, that fell vertically on their heads, had sheltered themselves under a clump of cedar-wood trees, and, carelessly stretched out on the ground, were smoking while waiting until the great heat had passed, and the evening breeze rose to enable them to continue their hunt. A quarter of elk was roasting for their dinner.

"Eh, *penni*!" Valentine said, addressing his comrade, and rising on his elbow, "the dinner seems to be ready: so suppose we feed? The sun is rapidly sinking behind the forest, and we shall soon have to start again."

"Eat," Curumilla answered, snarply.

The meat was laid on a leaf between the two hunters, who began eating with good appetite. Valentine had taken a third bite when he stopped, with his arm raised and his head bent forward, as if an unusual sound had suddenly smitten his ear. Curumilla imitated his friend, and both listened with that deep attention that only results from a lengthened desert-life; for on the prairie every sound is suspicious—every meeting is feared, especially with man.

Some time elapsed ere the noise which startled the hunters was repeated. For a moment they fancied themselves deceived, and Valentine took another bite, when he was again checked. This time he had distinctly heard a sound resembling a stifled sigh, but so weak and hollow that it needed the Trail-Hunter's practiced ear to catch it. Curumilla himself had perceived nothing. He looked at his friend in amazement, not knowing to what he should attribute his state of agitation. Valentine rose hurriedly, seized his rifle, and rushed in the direction of the river, his friend following him in all haste.

It was from the river, in fact, that the sigh heard by Valentine had come, and fortunately it was but a few paces distant. So soon as the hunters had leaped over the intervening bushes they found themselves on the bank, and a fearful sight presented itself to their startled eyes. A long plank was descending the river, turning on its axis, and borne by the current, which ran rather strongly at this point. On this plank was fastened a woman, who held a child in her clasped arms. Each time the plank revolved the unhappy woman plunged with her child in the stream, and at ten yards at the most from it an enormous cayman was swimming vigorously to snap at its two victims.

Valentine raised his rifle. Curumilla at the same moment glided into the water, holding his knife-blade between his teeth, and swam toward the plank. Valentine remained for a few seconds motionless, as if changed into a block of marble. All at once he pulled the trigger, and the discharge was re-echoed by the distant mountains. The cayman leaped out of the water, and plunged down again; but it reappeared a moment later, belly upward. It was dead. Valentine's bullet had passed through its eye.

In the mean while Curumilla had reached the plank with a few strokes. Without loss of time he turned it in the opposite direction from what it was following; and while holding it so that it could not revolve, he pushed it on the sand. In two strokes he cut the bonds that held the hapless woman, seized her in his arms, and ran off with her to the bivouac fire.

The poor woman gave no signs of life, and the two hunters eagerly sought to restore her. She was an Indian, apparently not more than eighteen, and very beautiful. Valentine found great difficulty in loosening her arms and removing the baby; for the frail creature, about a year old, by an incomprehensible miracle, had been preserved—thanks, doubtless, to its mother's devotion. It smiled pleasantly at the hunter when he laid it tenderly on a bed of dry leaves.

Curumilla opened the woman's mouth slightly with his knife-blade, placed in it the mouth of his gourd, and made her swallow a few drops of liquor. A long time elapsed ere she gave the slightest move that indicated an approaching return to life. The hunters, however, would not be foiled by the ill-success of their attentions, but redoubled their efforts. At length a deep sigh burst painfully from the sufferer's oppressed chest, and she opened her eyes, murmuring in a voice as weak as a breath,

"My child!"

This cry of the soul—this first and supreme appeal of a mother on the verge of the tomb—affected the two men with hearts of bronze. Valentine cautiously lifted the child, which had gone to sleep peacefully on the leaves, and presented it to the mother, saying in a soft voice:

"Mother, he lives!"

At these words which restored her hope, the woman leaped up as if moved by a spring, seized the child, and covered it with kisses, as she burst into tears. The hunters respected this outpouring of maternal love; they withdrew, leaving food and water by the woman's side. At sunset the two men returned. The woman was squatting by the fire, nursing her child, and lulling it to sleep by singing an Indian song. The night passed tranquilly, the two hunters watching in turn over the slumbers of the woman they had saved, and who reposed in peace.

At sunrise she awoke; and with the skill and handiness peculiar to the women of her race, she rekindled the fire and prepared breakfast. The two men looked at her with a smile, then threw their rifles over their shoulders, and set out in search of game. When they returned to the bivouac the meal was ready. After eating, Valentine lit his Indian pipe, seated himself at the foot of a tree, and addressed the young woman:

"What is my sister's name?" he asked.

"Tonameyotl (the Sunbeam)," she replied, with a joyous smile that revealed the double row of pearls that adorned her mouth.

"My sister has a pretty name," Valentine answered. "She doubtless belongs to the great nation of the Apaches."

"The Apaches are dogs," she said in a hollow voice, and with a flash of hatred in her glance. "The Comanche women will weave them petticoats. The Apaches are cowardly as coyotes: they only fight a hundred against one. The Comanche warriors are like the tempest."

"Is my sister the wife of a chief?"

"Where is the warrior who does not know Unicorn?" she said proudly.

Valentine bowed. He had already heard the name of this terrible chief pronounced several times. Mexicans and Indians, trappers, hunters, and warriors, all felt for him a respect mingled with terror.

"Sunbeam is Unicorn's wife," the Indian girl continued.

"Good!" Valentine answered. "My sister will tell me where to find the village of her tribe, and I will lead her back to the chief."

The young woman smiled.

"I have in my heart a small bird that sings at every instant of the day," she said in her gentle and melodious voice. "The swallow can not live without its mate, and the chief is on the trail of the Sunbeam."

"We will await the chief here, then,"

Valentine said.

The hunter felt great pleasure in conversing with this simple child.

"How was my sister thus fastened to the trunk of a tree and thrown into the current of the Gila, to perish there with her child? It is an atrocious vengeance."

"Yes, it is the vengeance of an Apache dog," she answered. "Aztatl (the Heron), daughter of Stanapat, the great chief of the Apaches, loved Unicorn—her heart bounded at the mere name of the great Comanche warrior; but the chief of my nation has only one heart, and it belongs to Sunbeam. Two days ago the warriors of my tribe set out for a great buffalo-hunt, and the squaws alone remained in the village. While I slept in my hut, four Apache thieves, taking advantage of my slumber, seized me and my child, and delivered us into the hands of Stanapat's daughter. 'You love your husband,' she said to me with a grin: 'you doubtless suffer at being separated from him. Be happy! I will send you to him by the shortest road. He is hunting on the prairies down the river, and in two hours you will be in his arms, unless,' she added with a laugh, 'the caymans stop you on the road.' 'The Comanche woman despises death,' I answered her. 'For a hair you pluck from me, Unicorn will take the scalps of your whole tribe; so act as you think proper,' and I turned my head away, resolved to answer her no more. She herself fastened me to the log, with my face turned to the sky, in order, as she said, that I might see my road; and then she hurled me into the river, yelling, 'Unicorn is a cowardly rabbit, whom the Apache women despise. This is how I revenge myself.' I have told my brother, the pale hunter, every thing as it happened."

"My sister is a brave woman," Valentine replied: "she is worthy to be the wife of a renowned chief."

The young mother smiled as she embraced her child, which she presented, with a movement full of grace, to the hunter, who kissed it on the forehead. At this moment the song of the maukaws was heard at a short distance off. The two hunters raised their heads in surprise, and looked around them.

"The quail sings very late, I fancy," Valentine muttered suspiciously.

The Indian girl smiled as she looked down, but gave no answer. Suddenly a slight cracking of dry branches disturbed the silence. Valentine and Curumilla made a move, as if to spring up and seize their rifles that lay by their side.

"My brothers must not stir," the squaw said quickly: "it is a friend."

The hunters remained motionless, and the girl then imitated with rare perfection the cry of the blue jay. The bushes parted, and an Indian warrior, perfectly painted and armed for war, bounded like a jackal over the grass and herbs that obstructed his passage, and stopped in face of the hunters. The warrior was Unicorn. He saluted the two men with that grace innate in the Indian race; then he crossed his arms on his breast and waited, without taking a glance at his squaw, or even appearing to have seen her. On her side the Indian woman did not stir.

During several moments a painful silence fell on the four persons whom chance had brought together in so strange a way. At length Valentine, seeing that the warrior insisted on being silent, decided he would be the first to speak.

"Unicorn is welcome to our camp," he said. "Let him take a seat by the fire of his brothers, and share with them the provisions they possess."

"I will take a seat by the fire of my pale-

face brother," he replied; "but he must first answer me a question I wish to ask him."

"My brother can speak: my ears are open."

"Good!" the chief answered. "How is it the hunters have with them Unicorn's wife?"

"Sunbeam can answer that question best," Valentine said, gravely.

The chief turned to his squaw.

"I am waiting," he remarked.

The Indian woman repeated, word for word, to her husband the story she had told a few minutes before. Unicorn listened without evincing either surprise or wrath; his face remained impassive, but his brows were imperceptibly contracted. When the woman had finished speaking the Comanche bowed his head on his chest, and remained for a moment plunged in serious thought. Presently he raised his head.

"Who saved Sunbeam from the river when she was about to perish?" he asked her.

The young woman's face was lit up with a charming smile.

"These hunters," she replied.

"Good!" the chief said, laconically, as he bent on the two men a glance full of the most unspeakable gratitude.

"Could we leave her to perish?" Valentine said.

"My brothers did well. Unicorn is one of the first sachems of his nation. His tongue is not forked: he gives his heart once, and takes it back no more. Unicorn's heart belongs to the hunters."

These simple words were uttered with the majesty and grandeur the Indians know so well how to assume when they think proper. The two men vowed their gratitude, and the chief continued:

"Unicorn is returning to his village with his wife: his young men are awaiting him twenty paces from here. He would be happy if the hunters would consent to accompany him there."

"Chief," Valentine answered, "we came into the prairie to hunt the buffalo."

"Well, what matter? My brothers will hunt with me and my young men; but if they wish to prove to me that they accept my friendship, they will follow me to my village."

"The chief is mounted, while we are on foot."

"I have horses."

Any further resistance would have been a breach of politeness, and the hunters accepted the invitation. Valentine, whom accident had brought out to the prairies of the Rio Gila and Del Norte, was in his heart not sorry to make friends there, and have allies on whose support he could reckon in case of need. The squaw had by this time risen: she timidly approached her husband, and held up the child, saying in a soft and frightened voice:

"Kiss this warrior."

The chief took the frail creature in his muscular arms, and kissed it repeatedly with a display of extraordinary tenderness, and then returned it to the mother. The latter wrapped the babe in a small blanket, then placed it on a plank shaped like a cradle, and covered with dry moss, fastened a loop over the place where its head rested, to guard it from the burning beams of the sun, and hung the whole on her back by means of a woollen strap passing over her forehead.

"I am ready," she said.

"Let us go," the chief replied.

The hunters followed him and they were soon on the prairie.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ADOPTION.

SOME sixty Comanche warriors were lying in the grass awaiting their sachem, while their tethered horses were nibbling the tall prairie grasses and the tree-shoots. It could be seen at the first glance that these men were picked warriors, selected for a dangerous expedition. From the heels of all dangled five or six wolf-tails—marks of honor which only renowned warriors have the right to wear.

On seeing their chief they hurriedly rose and leaped into their saddles. All were aware that their sachem's wife had been carried off, and the object of their expedition was to deliver her. Still, on noticing her, they evidenced no surprise, but saluted her as if she had left them only a few moments previously. The war-party had with it several horses, which the chief ordered to be given to his squaw and his new friends: then, at a signal from him, the whole party started at full speed, for the Indians know no other pace than the gallop.

After about two hours' ride they reached the vicinity of the village, which could be smelt some time before reached, owing to

the habit the Comanches have of placing their dead on scaffoldings outside the villages, where they molder away: these scaffoldings, composed of four stakes planted in the ground, terminated in a fork, while from poles stuck up near them hung skins and other offerings made by the Indians to the genius of good.

At the entrance of the village a number of horsemen were assembled, awaiting the return of the sachem. So soon as they perceived him they burst into a formidable yell, and rushed forward like a whirlwind, shouting, firing guns, and brandishing their weapons. Unicorn's band followed this example, and there was soon a most extraordinary confusion.

The sachem made his entry into the village in the midst of shouts, barking of dogs, and shots; in short, he was accompanied to the square by an indescribable row. On reaching it the warriors stopped. Unicorn begged the hunters to dismount, and guided them to his cabin, which he made them enter before him.

"Now," he said to them, "brothers, you are at home: rest in peace, eat and drink. This evening I will come and talk with you, and make you a proposal which I sincerely hope you will not reject."

The two hunters, wearied by the long ride they had made, fell back with extreme satisfaction on the beds of dried leaves which awaited them.

"Well," Valentine asked Curumilla, "what do you say about what is happening to us?"

"It may be good."

"Can it not?"

"Yes."

On which Curumilla fell asleep, and Valentine soon followed his example. As he had promised, toward evening Unicorn entered the cabin.

"Have my brothers rested?" he asked.

"Yes," Valentine answered.

"Are they disposed to listen to me?"

"Speak, chief; we are listening."

The Comanche sachem then squatted near the fire, and remained for several minutes, with his head bent forward and his eyes fixed on the ground, in the position of a man who is reflecting. At length he raised his head, stretched forth his arm as if to give greater authority to the words he was about to utter, and began thus:

"Brother, you and your friend are two brave warriors. The prairies rejoice at your arrival among us; the deer and the buffaloes fly at your approach; for your arm is strong, and your eye unerring. Unicorn is only a poor Indian; but he is a great warrior among the Comanches, and a much-feared chief of his tribe. You have saved his wife, Sunbeam, whom the Apache dogs threw into the Gila, and whom the hideous alligators were preparing to devour. Since his wife, the joy of his hearth, and his son, the hope of his old days, have been restored to him, Unicorn has sought in his heart the means to prove to you his gratitude. He asked the Chief of Life what he could do to attach you to him. Unicorn is terrible in combat; he has the heart of the grizzly bear for his enemies—he has the heart of the gazelle for those he loves."

"Chief," Valentine answered, "the words you utter at this moment amply repay us for what we have done. We are happy to have saved the wife and son of a celebrated warrior: our reward is in our hearts, and we wish for no other."

The chief shook his head.

"No," he said; "the two hunters are no longer strangers for the Comanches: they are the brothers of our tribe. During their sleep Unicorn assembled round the council-fire the chiefs of his nation, and told them what has passed. The chiefs have ranged themselves on Unicorn's side, and have ordered him to make known to the hunters the resolution they have formed."

"Speak, then, chief," Valentine said, "and believe that the wishes of the council will be commands to us."

A smile of joy played round the chief's lips.

"Good!" he said. "This is what was agreed on among the great chiefs. My brothers the hunters will be adopted by the tribe, and be henceforth sons of the great Comanche nation. What say my brothers?"

A lively feeling of pleasure made Valentine quiver at this unexpected proposition. To be adopted by the Comanche tribe was obtaining the right of hunting over the whole extent of the immense prairies which that powerful nation holds through its indomitable courage and the number of its warriors. The hunter exchanged a glance with his silent comrade and rose.

"I accept for myself and friend," he said, as he held out his hand to the chief, "the honor the Comanches do us in admitting us into the number of the sons of their warlike

nation. We shall prove ourselves worthy of this marked favor."

Unicorn smiled.

"To-morrow," he said, as he rose, "my brothers will be adopted by the nation."

After bowing gracefully to the hunters he took leave of them and withdrew. The next daybreak the chiefs entered the cabin. Valentine and Curumilla were ready, and had long been acquainted with the trials they would have to undergo. They were conducted into the great medicine-hut, where a copious meal was prepared. It consisted of dog-meat boiled in bear-fat, tortillas, maize and haule cakes. The chiefs squatted in a circle, while the squaws waited on them.

When the meal was ended all rose. Unicorn placed himself between the two hunters, laid his hands on their heads, and struck up the great war-song. This song was repeated in chorus by the company to the sound of the war-whistles and drums. The following is the translation of the song:

"Master of Life, regard us with a favorable eye.

We are receiving two brothers in arms who appear to have sense.

They display vigor in their arms.

They fear not to expose their bodies to the blows of the enemy."

It is impossible for any one who has not been present at the ceremony to form even a distant idea of the frightful noise produced by their hoarse voices mingled with the shrill and discordant instruments; it was enough to produce a deafness. When the song was ended each took his seat by the council-fire.

The hunters were seated on beaver-skins, and the great war-calumet was presented to them, from which each took several puffs, and it went the round. Unicorn then rose, and fastened round the neck of each a wampum collar, and another made of the claws of the grizzly bear. The Indians, during this time, had built near the medicine-lodge a cabin for the sweating, and when it was finished the hunters took off their clothes and entered it. The chiefs then brought two large stones which had been previously made red-hot, and after closing the hut carefully, left the neophytes in it.

The latter threw water on the stones, and the steam which arose almost immediately produced a perspiration. When this was at its height the hunters ran out of the hut, passed through the double row of warriors, and leaped into the river, according to the usual fashion. They were immediately drawn from the water, wrapped in blankets, and led to Unicorn's hut, in order to undergo the final trial, which is also the most painful. The hunters were laid on their backs, and then Unicorn traced on their chests, with a stick dipped in water in which gunpowder had been dissolved, the figure of the animal serving as *totem* (protector) to the tribe. Then with two spikes fastened to a small piece of wood, and dipped in vermillion, he proceeded to prick the design.

Whenever Unicorn came to a place that was too hard he made an incision in the flesh with a gun-flint. The places that were not marked with vermillion were rubbed in with powder, so that the result was a red and blue tattooing. During the course of this operation the war-songs and *chikikoués* were constantly heard, in order to drown the cries which the atrocious pain might draw from the patients; but the latter endured it all without even a contraction of the eyebrows evidencing the pain that must have been felt.

When the tattooing was over the wounds were cauterized with rotten-wood to prevent suppuration: then they were washed with cold water, in which had been infused an herb resembling box, a great deal of which the Indians mix with their tobacco to reduce its strength. The trial we have described is so painful to endure, that nearly always it is only accomplished at intervals, and often lasts a week. This time the hunters endured it bravely during the six hours it lasted, not uttering a cry, or giving a sign of weakness. Hence the Indians, from this moment, regarded them with a species of respect: for with them courage is the first of qualities.

"My brothers are children of the tribe," the chief said, offering each a horse. "The prairie belongs to them. These coursers will bear them to the most remote limits of the desert, chasing the wild beasts, or pursuing the Apache dogs."

"Good!" Valentine answered.

At one bound the two hunters were in their saddles, and made their horses perform the most elegant and graceful curvets. This last and heroic deed, after all they had suffered during the course of the day, raised to their full height the joy and enthusiasm of the Comanches, who applauded with frenzied shouts and yells all they saw their new brothers execute. After remaining nearly an hour on horseback they dismounted, and followed the chiefs into the medicine-lodge; and when each had taken his seat round

the council-fire, and the calumet had again been smoked, Unicorn rose.

"The Master of Life loves his Comanche sons, since He gives them for brothers such warriors as Koutonepi and Curumilla. Who can equal their courage? Who would dare to contend with them? On their approach the grizzly bear hides at the extremity of its den; the jaguar bounds far away on seeing them: the eagle itself, which looks the sun in the face, flies from their unerring bullet. Brothers, we congratulate ourselves on counting you among our warriors. Henceforth we shall be invincible. Brothers, give up the names you have up to this day borne, and assume those we now give you. You, Koutonepi, are henceforth Quauhtli, and bear the name of that eagle, whose courage and strength you possess. You, Curumilla, will be called Vexoloti, and the cock will be proud to see that you have taken possession of its name."

The two hunters warmly thanked their new brothers, and were led back by the chiefs to their cabin, who wished them a pleasant night after so rude a day. Such was the way in which Valentine and Curumilla, to whom we shall continue to give their old names, formed the acquaintance of Unicorn, and the result of it.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MISSIONARY.

WITH time the relations existing between the hunters and the Indians were drawn closer, and became more friendly. In the desert physical strength is the quality most highly esteemed. Man, compelled to struggle incessantly against the dangers of every description that rise each moment before him, is bound to look only to himself for the means to surmount them. Hence the Indians profess a profound contempt for sickly people, and weak and timid nerves.

Valentine easily induced Unicorn to seize, during the hunt of the wild horses, the Mexican magistrates, in order to make hostages of them if the conspiracy were unsuccessful. What the hunter foresaw happened. Red Cedar had opposed stratagem to stratagem; and, as we have seen, Don Miguel was arrested in the midst of his triumph, at the very moment when he fancied himself master of the Paso del Norte.

After Valentine, Curumilla, and Don Pablo had seen, from their hiding-place in the bushes, the mournful escort pass that was taking Don Miguel as a prisoner to Santa Fé, they held a council. Moments were precious, for in Mexico conspirators have the sad privilege over other prisoners of being tried quickly, and not left to pine. The prisoner must be saved. Valentine, with that promptitude of decision which formed the salient point of his character, soon arranged in his head one of those bold schemes which only he could discover.

"Courage!" he said to Don Pablo. "As long as the heart beats in the breast there is hope, thank Heaven! The first hand is lost, I allow; but now for the second game."

Don Pablo had entire faith in Valentine: he had often been in the position to try his friend. If these words did not completely reassure him, they at least almost restored his hope, and gave him back that courage so necessary to him at this supreme moment, and which had abandoned him.

"Speak, my friend," he said. "What is to be done?"

"Let us attend to the most important thing first, and save Father Seraphin, who devoted himself for us."

The three men started. The night was a gloomy one. The moon only appeared at intervals: incessantly veiled by thick clouds which passed over its disk, it seemed to shed its sickly rays regretfully on the earth. The wind whistled through the branches of the trees, which uttered mysterious murmurs as they came into collision. The coyotes howled in the plain, and at times their sinister forms shot athwart the sky-line. After a march of about an hour the three men approached the spot where the missionary had fallen from the effect of Red Cedar's bullet; but he had disappeared. An alarm mingled with a frightful agony contracted the hunters' hearts. Valentine took a despairing glance around; but the darkness was too dense for him possibly to distinguish any thing.

"What is to be done?" Don Pablo asked sadly.

"Seek," Valentine replied sharply: "he can not be far off."

Curumilla had already taken up the trail, and had disappeared in the gloom. The Arancano had never been a great speaker naturally: with age he had grown almost dumb, and never uttered a word save when absolutely necessary. But if the Indian

did not talk, he acted; and in critical situations his determination was often worth long harangues. Don Pablo, obedient to Valentine's orders, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and prepared to execute them.

"Where are you going?" the hunter asked him, as he seized his arm.

"To look for Father Seraphin."

"Wait."

The two men stood motionless, listening to the mysterious sounds of the desert, that nameless melody which plunges the soul into a soft reverie. Nearly an hour passed thus, nothing revealing to the hunters that Curumilla's search had proved successful. Valentine growing impatient at this long delay, was also preparing to go on the trail, when all at once the weak, snapping cry of the walkon rose in the air.

"What's that?" Don Pablo asked in surprise.

"Silence!" Valentine muttered.

A second time the walkon sung, but this time stronger, and much nearer. Valentine raised his fingers to his lips, and imitated the sharp, shrill yell of the ocelot twice with such perfection, that Don Pablo started involuntarily, and looked round for the wild beast, whose eyes he fancied he could see flashing behind a thicket. Almost immediately the note of the walkon was heard a third time. Valentine rested the butt of his rifle on the ground.

"Good!" he said. "Do not be alarmed, Don Pablo. Curumilla has found Father Seraphin."

The young man looked at him in amazement. The hunter smiled.

"They will both arrive directly," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Child!" Valentine interrupted him, "in the desert the human voice is more injurious than useful. The song of birds, the cry of wild beasts, serve us as language."

"Yes," the young man answered simply, "that is true. I have often heard it stated; but I was not aware you could understand one another so easily."

"That is nothing," the hunter remarked, good humoredly: "you will see much more if you only pass a month in our company."

In a few moments the sound of footsteps became audible, at first faint, then gradually coming nearer, and two shadows were dimly drawn on the night.

"Hallo!" Valentine shouted, as he raised and cocked his rifle, "friend or foe?"

"*Tennis* (brothers)," a voice answered.

"It is Curumilla," said Valentine. "Let us go to meet him."

Don Pablo followed him, and they soon reached the Indian, who walked slowly, obliged as he was to support, almost carry, the missionary.

When Father Seraphin fell off his horse he almost immediately lost his senses. He remained for a long time lying in the ditch, but by degrees the night cold had brought him round again. At the first moment the poor priest, whose ideas were still confused, had cast anxious glances around him, while asking himself how he came there, and by what concurrence of strange events it had happened. He tried to rise; but then a poignant pain he felt in his shoulders reminded him of what had occurred. Still he did not despair. Alone by night in the desert; exposed to a thousand unknown dangers, of which the least was being devoured by wild beasts; without weapons to defend himself; too weak, indeed, to attempt it, even if he had them, he resolved not to remain in this terrible position, but make the greatest efforts to rise, and drag himself as well as he could to the Paso, which was three leagues distant at the most, where he was sure of finding that care his condition demanded.

Father Seraphin, like the majority of the missionaries who generously devote themselves to the welfare of humanity, was a man who, under a weak and almost feminine appearance, concealed an indomitable energy, and a resolution that would withstand all trials. So soon as he had formed his plan he began carrying it out. With extreme difficulty and atrocious pain he succeeded in fastening his handkerchief round his shoulder, so as to check the hemorrhage. It took more than an hour before he could stand on his legs: often he felt himself fainting, a cold perspiration beaded at the root of his hair, he had a buzzing in his ears, and every thing seemed to be turning round him; but he wrestled with the pain, clasped his hands with an effort, raised his tear-laden eyes to heaven, and murmured from the bottom of his heart:

"Oh God! deign to support thy servant, for he has set on Thee all his hope and confidence."

Prayer, when made with faith, produces in a man an effect whose consequences are immediate: it consoles him, gives him cour-

age, and almost restores him the strength that has deserted him. This was what happened to Father Seraphin. After uttering these few words he set out boldly, supporting his tottering footsteps with a stick, which a providential chance had placed in his way. He walked thus for nearly half a league, stopping at every instant to draw breath; but human endurance has limits beyond which it can not go. In spite of the efforts he made, the missionary at length felt his legs give way under him; he understood that he could not go further; and he sunk at the foot of a tree, certain that he had attempted impossibilities, and henceforth resigning to Providence the care of saving him.

It was at this moment Curumilla arrived near him. The Indian aided him to rise, and then warned his comrades of the success of his search. Father Seraphin, though the chief offered to carry him, refused, and wished to walk to join his friends; but his strength deserted him a second time, he lost his senses, and fell into the arms of the Indian, who watched him attentively; for he noticed his increasing weakness, and foresaw his fall. Valentine and Curumilla hastily constructed a litter of tree-branches, on which they laid the poor wounded man, and raising him on their shoulders, went off with him rapidly. The night passed away, and the sun was already high on the horizon, and yet the hunters were marching. At length, at about eleven o'clock, they reached the cavern which served Valentine as a shelter, and to which he had resolved to carry his patient, that he might himself nurse him.

Father Seraphin was in a raging fever; his face was red, his eyes flashing. As nearly always happens with gun-shot wounds, a suppurating fever had declared itself. The missionary was laid on a bed of furs, and Valentine immediately prepared to probe the wound. By a singular chance the ball had lodged in the shoulder without fracturing the blade-bone. Valentine drew it; and then, helped by Curumilla, who had quietly pounded oregano leaves, he formed a cataplasm, which he laid on the wound, after first carefully washing it. Scarcely had this been done ere the missionary fell into a deep sleep, which lasted till nightfall.

Valentine's treatment had effected wonders. The fever had disappeared, the priest's features were calmed, the flush that purpled his cheeks had given place to a pallor caused by the loss of blood; in short, he was as well as could be expected. On opening his eyes he perceived the three hunters watching him anxiously. He smiled, and said in a weak voice:

"Thanks, my brothers, thanks for the help you have afforded me. Heaven will reward you. I feel much better."

"The Lord be praised!" Valentine answered. "You will escape, my father, more cheaply than I had dared to hope."

"Can it be possible?"

"Yes; your wound, though serious, is not dangerous, and in a few days you can, if you think necessary, resume your avocations."

"I thank you for this new good, my dear Valentine. I no longer count the times I owed my life to you. Heaven, in its infinite goodness has placed you near me to support me in my tribulations, and succor me in days of danger."

The hunter blushed.

"Do not speak so, my father," he said; "I have only performed a sacred duty. Do you feel strong enough to talk for a few minutes with me?"

"Yes. Speak, my friend."

"I wished to ask your advice."

"My talents are very slight: still you know how I love you, Valentine. Tell me what vexes you, and perhaps I may be useful to you."

"I believe it, my father."

"Speak, then, in heaven's name, my friend; for, if you have recourse to me, the affair must be very serious."

"It can not be more so."

"Go on: I am listening."

And the missionary settled himself on his bed to hear as comfortably as he could the confession the hunter wished to make to him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE INTERVIEW.

At daybreak the next morning Curumilla started for Unicorn's village. At sunset he returned to the cavern, accompanied by the Comanche chief. The sachem entertained the most profound respect for Father Seraphin, whose noble character he could appreciate, and felt pained at the state in which he found him.

"Father," he said to him, as he kissed his

hand, "who are the villains who thus wounded you, to whom the Master of Life has imparted the secret to make us happy? Whoever they may be, these men shall die."

"My son," the priest answered, gently, "I will not pronounce before you the name of the unhappy man who, in a moment of madness, raised his hand against me. My God is a God of peace; he is merciful, and recommends his creatures to forget injuries, and requite good for evil."

The Indian looked at him in amazement. He did not understand the soft and touching sublimity of these precepts of love. Educated in the sanguinary principles of his race—persuaded like all red-skins, that a warrior's first duty is revenge—he only admitted that ferocious law of the prairies which commands, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth"—a terrible law, which we do not venture, however, utterly to condemn in these countries, where ambushes are permanent, and implacable death stands at every corner of the road.

"My son," Father Seraphin continued, "you are a great warrior. Many a time you have braved the atrocious tortures of the stake of blood, a thousand-fold more terrible than death itself. Often have you, with a pleasure I excuse (for it is in your nature,) thrown down your enemy, and planted your knee on his chest. Have you never pardoned anybody in fight?"

"Never!" the Indian answered, his eye sparkling with satisfied pride. "Unicorn has sent many Apache dogs to the happy hunting-grounds: their scalps are drying at the door of his cabin."

"Well," the missionary said, gently, "try clemency once, only once, and you will know one of the greatest pleasures God has granted to man on this earth—that of pardoning."

The chief shook his head.

"No," he said; "a dead enemy is no longer to be feared. Better to kill than leave him means to avenge himself at a later date."

"My son, you love me, I believe?"

"Yes. My father is good; he has behaved well to the Comanches, and they are grateful. Let my father command, and his son will obey."

"I have no right to give you an order, my son. I can only ask a favor of you."

"Good! My father can explain himself. Unicorn will do what he desires."

"Well, then," said the missionary, with a lively feeling of joy, "promise me to pardon the first unhappy man, whoever he may be, who falls into your hands, and you will render me happy."

The chief frowned, and an expression of dissatisfaction appeared on his features. Father Seraphin anxiously followed on the Comanche's intelligent countenance the different shadows reflected on it as in a mirror. At length the Indian regained his stoicism, and his face grew serene again.

"Does my father demand it?" he asked, in a gentle voice.

"I desire it."

"Be it so: my father shall be satisfied. I promise him to pardon the first enemy whom the Manitou causes to fall beneath the point of my lance."

"Thanks, chief," the missionary exclaimed, joyfully, "thanks! Heaven will reward you for this good idea."

The Indian bowed silently and turned to Valentine, who had been listening to the conversation.

"My brother called me, and I came. What does he want of Unicorn?"

"My brother will take his seat at the council-fire, and smoke the calumet with his friend. Chiefs do not speak without reflecting on the words they are about to utter."

"My brother speaks well, and I will take my seat at his fire."

Curumilla had lighted a large fire in the first grotto of the cavern. The four men left Father Seraphin to take a few minutes' rest, and seated themselves round the fire, when the calumet passed from hand to hand. The Indians never undertake any thing important, or commence a discussion, without first smoking the calumet in council, whatever may be the circumstances in which they are placed. When the calumet had gone the round Valentine rose.

"Every day," he said, bowing to the chief, "I appreciate more and more the honor the Comanches did me in adopting me as a son. My brother's nation is powerful; its hunting-grounds cover the whole surface of the earth. The Apaches fly before the Comanche warriors like cowardly coyotes before courageous men. My brother has already several times done me a service with that greatness of soul which distinguishes him, and can only belong to a warrior so celebrated as he is. To-day I have again a service to ask of my brother, and will he do

it me? I presume so; for I know his heart, and that the Great Spirit of the Master of Life dwells in him."

"Let my brother explain," Unicorn answered. "He is speaking to a chief: he must remove the skin from his heart, and let his blood flow red and bright before a friend. The great white hunter is a portion of myself. I should have to be prevented by an arrant impossibility if I refused any request emanating from him."

"Thanks, brother," Valentine said with emotion. "Your words have passed from your lips into my breast, which they have rejoiced. I am not mistaken. I see that I can ever count on your well-trying friendship and honest aid. Don Miguel Zarate, the descendant of the Mexican kings, the friend of the red-skins, whom he has ever protected, is a prisoner to the gachupinos. They have carried him to Santa Fé in order to put him to death, and deprive the Indians of the last friend left them."

"And what does my brother want?"

"I wish to save my friend."

"Good!" the chief answered. "My brother claims my help to succeed in that project, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Good! My brother can feel reassured."

"I can count, then, on my brother's aid?" Valentine asked, quickly.

The chief smiled.

"Unicorn holds in his hands Spaniards who will answer for the life of the prisoner."

"That is true!" Valentine exclaimed as he struck his forehead. "Your idea is a good one, chief."

"My brother will leave me to act. I answer for success on my head."

"Act as you please, chief. Still, were it only for form's sake, I should not be sorry to know what you intend doing."

"My brother has a white skin, but his heart is Indian. Let him trust to the prudence of a chief: Unicorn knows how to treat with the gachupinos."

"Doubtless."

"Unicorn will go to Santa Fé to speak with the chief of the white men."

Valentine looked at him in amazement. The chief smiled.

"Have I not hostages?" he said.

"That is true," Valentine remarked.

The chief went on:

"The Spaniards are, like chattering old women, prodigal of seductive words; but Unicorn knows them. How many times already has he trodden the war-path on their territory at the head of his warriors! They will not dare to deceive him. Ere the sun has twice accomplished its revolution round the tortoise whose immense shell supports the world, the chief of the Comanches will carry the bloody arrows to the whites, and propose to them peace or war. Is my brother satisfied?"

"I am. My heart is full of gratitude toward my red brother."

"Good! What is that to Unicorn? Less than nothing. Has my brother any thing else to ask of me?"

"One thing more."

"Let my brother explain himself as quickly as possible, that no cloud may remain between him and his red brother."

"I will do so. Men without fear of the Great Spirit, urged by some mad desire, have carried off Dona Clara, the daughter of the white chief whom my brother is pledged to save."

"Who are these men? Does my brother know them?"

"Yes, I know them only too well. They are bandits, at the head of whom is a monster with a human face, called Red Cedar."

At this name the Indian started slightly, his eye flashed fire, and a deep wrinkle hollowed his forehead.

"Red Cedar is a ferocious jaguar," he said with concentrated passion. "He has made himself the scourge of the Indians, whose scalps he desires. This man has no pity either for women or children, but he possesses no courage: he only attacks his enemies in the dark, twenty against one, and when he is sure of meeting with no resistance."

"My brother knows this man, I see."

"And this man has carried off the white gazelle?"

"Yes."

"Good! My brother wishes to know what Red Cedar has done with his prisoner?"

"I do wish it."

The Indian rose.

"Time is slipping away," he said. "Unicorn will return to his friends. My brother the hunter need not feel alarmed: a chief is watching."

After uttering these few words the chief went down into the cavern, mounted his horse, and disappeared in the direction of the desert. Valentine had every reason to be satisfied with his interview with the Comanche chief; but Father Seraphin was

less pleased than the hunter. The worthy priest, both through his nature and his vocation, was not disposed to employ violent measures, which were repugnant to him: he would have liked, were it possible, to settle every thing by gentleness, and without running the risk of bloodshed.

Three weeks elapsed, however, ere Unicorn appeared to be effectually carrying out the plan he had explained to Valentine, who only learnt indirectly that a strong party of Comanche warriors had invaded the Mexican frontiers. Father Seraphin, though not yet completely cured, had insisted on proceeding to Santa Fé to take some steps to save Don Miguel, whose trial had gone on rapidly, and who was on the point of being executed. For his part, Don Pablo, half mad with uneasiness, also insisted, in spite of Valentine's entreaties and remarks, on entering Santa Fé furtively, and trying to see his father.

The night on which we found Valentine in the clearing Unicorn visited him for the first time in a month: he came to inform him of the success of the measures he had taken. Valentine, used to Indian habits, understood half a word: hence he had not hesitated to announce to Don Pablo as a positive fact that his father would soon be free.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PRISON.

DON MIGUEL and General Ibanez had managed to be confined together by the expenditure of many entreaties and a heavy sum of gold. They inhabited two wretched rooms, the entire furniture of which consisted in a halting-table, a few leather-covered butacas, and two benches which served them as beds. These two men, so powerful by nature, had endured without complaint all the humiliation and insults inflicted on them during their trial, resolved to die as they had lived, with head erect and firm heart, without giving the judges who had condemned them the satisfaction of seeing them turn weak at the last moment.

It was toward the evening of the same day on which we saw Valentine in the clearing. Darkness fell rapidly, and the only window, a species of narrow slit that served to light the prison, allowed but a weak and dubious light to penetrate. Don Miguel was walking with long strides up and down his prison, while the General, carelessly reclining on one of the benches, quietly smoked his cigarette, watching with childish pleasure the clouds of bluish smoke which rose in a spiral to the ceiling, and which he constantly blew asunder.

"Well," Don Miguel said all at once, "it seems it is not for to-day either."

"Yes," the General said, "unless (though I do not believe it) they wish to do us the honor of a torchlight execution."

"Can you at all account for this delay?"

"On my honor, no. I have ransacked my brains in vain to guess the reason that prevents them shooting us, and I have given it up as a bad job."

"Same with me. At first I fancied they were trying to frighten us by the continued apprehension of death constantly suspended over our heads like another sword of Damocles; but this idea seemed to me too absurd."

"I am entirely of your opinion; still something extraordinary must be occurring."

"What makes you suppose that?"

"Why, for the last two days our worthy jailer, Tio Quesada, has become, not polite to us (for that is impossible), but less brutal. I notice that he has drawn in his claws, and attempted a grin. It is true that his face is so little accustomed to assume that expression, that the only result he obtains is to make a wretched grimace."

"And you conclude from that?"

"Nothing positive," the General said.

"Still I ask myself whence comes this incomprehensible change. It would be as absurd to attribute it to the pity he feels for our position as to suppose that the Governor will come to ask our pardon for having tried and condemned us."

"Eh?" Don Miguel said with a toss of his head. "All is not over—we are not dead yet."

"That is true; but keep your mind at rest—we shall be so, soon."

"Our life is in God's hands. He will dispose of it at his pleasure."

"Amen!" the General said reverently, as he rolled a fresh cigarette.

"Do you not consider it extraordinary that, during the whole month we have been confined here, our friends have not given a sign of life?"

The General shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Hum!" he said, "a prisoner is very sick, and our friends doubtless feared to make us

worse by the sight of their grief: that is why they have deprived themselves of the pleasure of visiting us."

"Do not jest, General. You accuse them wrongfully, I feel convinced."

"May Heaven grant it! For my part, I heartily forgive them their indifference, and the oblivion in which they have left us."

"I can not believe that Don Valentine, that true-hearted and noble minded man, for whom I ever felt so deep a friendship, has not tried to see me."

"Bah! How, Don Miguel, can you, so near death as you are, still believe in honorable feelings in any man?"

At this moment there was a great clash of iron outside, and the door of the room was opened sufficiently to afford passage to the jailer, who preceded another person. The almost complete obscurity that prevailed in the prison prevented the condemned men from recognizing the visitor, who wore a long black gown.

"Eh, eh!" the General muttered in his comrade's ear, "I believe that General Ventura, our amiable Governor, has at length made up his mind."

"Why so?" Don Miguel asked in a low voice.

"He has sent us a priest, which means that we shall be executed to-morrow."

"On my word, all the better," Don Miguel could not refrain from saying.

In the mean while the jailer, a short, thick-set man, with a ferret-face and evening eye, had turned to the priest, whom he invited to enter, saying in a hoarse voice:

"Here it is, senor padre: these are the condemned persons."

"Will you leave us alone, my friend?" the stranger said.

"Will you have my lantern? It is getting dark, and when people are talking they like to see one another."

"Thanks; you can do so. You will open when I call you by tapping at the door."

"All right—I will do so," and he turned to the condemned, to whom he said savagely, "Well, senores, here is a priest. Take advantage of his services now you have got him. In your position there is no knowing what may happen from one moment to the other."

The prisoners shrugged their shoulders contemptuously, but made no reply. The jailer went out. When the sound of his footsteps had died away in the distance, the priest, who had till this moment stood with his body bent forward and his ear on the watch, drew himself up, and walked straight to Don Miguel. This maneuver on the part of the stranger surprised the two gentlemen, who anxiously awaited what was about to happen. The lantern left by the jailer only spread a faint and flickering light, scarcely sufficient to distinguish objects.

"My father," the hacendero said in a firm voice, "I thank the person who sent you to prepare me for death, for I anxiously wished to fulfill my duties as a Christian before being executed. If you will proceed with me into the adjoining room I will confess my sins to you: they are those which an honest man ordinarily commits: for my heart is pure, and I have nothing to reproach myself with."

The priest took off his hat, seized the lantern, and placed it near his pale face, whose noble and gentle features were suddenly displayed in the light.

"Father Seraphin!" the prisoners exclaimed with a surprise mingled with joy.

"Silence!" the priest ordered quickly.

"Do not pronounce my name so loudly, brothers: every one is ignorant of my being here except the jailer, who is my confidant."

"He!" Don Miguel said with stupor; "the man who has been insulting and humiliating us during a month!"

"That man is henceforth ours. Lose no time, come. I have secure means to get you out of prison, and to leave the town ere your evasion can be even suspected: the horses are prepared—an escort is awaiting you. Come, gentlemen, for the moments are precious."

The two prisoners interchanged a glance of sublime eloquence; then General Ibanez quietly seated himself on a butaca, while Don Miguel replied:

"Thanks, my father. You have undertaken the noble task of soothing all sorrow, and you do not wish to fail in your duty. Thanks for the offer you make us, which we can not, however, accept. Men like us must not give our enemies right by flying like criminals. We fought for a sacred principle, and succumbed. We owe it to our countrymen and to ourselves to endure death bravely. When we conspired we were perfectly well aware of what awaited us if we were conquered. Once again, thanks: but we will only quit this prison as free men or to walk to punishment."

"I have not the courage, gentlemen to

blame your heroic resolution: in a similar case I should act as you are doing. You have a very slight hope still left, so wait. Perchance, within a few hours, unforeseen events will occur to change the face of matters."

"We hope for nothing more, my father."

"That word is a blasphemy in your mouth, Don Miguel. God can do all he wills. Hope, I tell you."

"I am wrong, father: forgive me."

"Holla!" the jailer shouted through the door. "Make haste; it is getting late. It will soon be impossible to leave the city."

"Open the door," the missionary said, in a firm voice. The jailer appeared.

"Well?" he asked.

"Light me and lead me out of the prison. These caballeros refuse to profit by the chance of safety I came to offer them."

The jailer shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"They are mad," he said.

And he went out, followed by the priest.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE EMBASSY.

On the selfsame day that Father Serafin went to the prison to propose an escape to the condemned, a very strange circumstance had aroused the entire population of Santa Fé. At about mid-day, at the moment when the inhabitants were enjoying their siesta, and the streets, calcined by the beams of a tropical sun, were completely deserted, a formidable hurrah, the terrible war-yell of the Comanche Indians, burst forth at the entrance of the town.

A detachment of dismounted warriors, about two hundred strong, was marching in close column, flanked on either wing by two troops, each of fifty horse. About twenty paces in front came Unicorn.

The Comanches did not appear to notice the excitement they created. As soon as they were on the Plaza Mayor they halted, and remained motionless, as if their feet had suddenly grown to the ground. Unicorn made a sign with his talisman: a warrior quitted the ranks, and rode up to the sentry standing in front of the Governor's palace, who regarded the singular scene with a dazed air.

"Wah!" the Indian said, sarcastically, as he lightly touched the soldier with the end of his lance. "Is my brother asleep, that he does not hear a warrior addressing him?"

"I am not asleep," the soldier answered, as he fell back a pace. "What do you want?"

"Is my brother a chief?"

"No," the soldier answered, greatly confused by this lesson.

While the Comanche warrior was exchanging these few words with the sentry, several persons, came out of the palace attracted by the unusual disturbance. Among them were several officers, one of whom advanced to the Indian horseman.

"What does my brother want?" he asked him.

The warrior saw at the first glance that this time he had to do with a chief. He bowed courteously, and answered:

"A deputation of the great Comanche nation desires to be introduced to my great white father."

"Good! But all the warriors can not enter the palace," the officer said.

"My brother is right. Their chiefs alone will go in: their young men will await them here."

"Let my brother be patient. I will go and deliver his message in all haste."

"Good! My brother is a chief. The Spider will await him."

The officer disappeared in the interior, while the Spider planted the end of his long lance in the ground, and remained with his eye fixed on the gate of the palace, not evincing the slightest impatience.

The New Governor of Santa Fé was a General of the name of Don Benito Ventura. He was ignorant as a fish, stupid and haughty as a heathcock.

He had learned with the utmost terror the entrance of the Comanches into the town, and when the officer intrusted with Spider's message presented himself before him he had literally lost his head. It took all possible trouble to make him comprehend that the Indians came as friends. When at length he saw himself surrounded and supported by the officers of his staff his terror was slightly toned down; and being finally convinced by their arguments, he gave the officer who brought the message orders to bring the three principal Indian chiefs into the palace.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PRESENTATION.

The officer dispatched by General Ventura had performed his duty. Unicorn and two other chiefs dismounted, and followed him into the palace. There thirty officers, attired in their splendid uniforms, that glistened with gold and decorations, were arranged round the General, while three posts of ten men each held the doors of the hall of reception.

When the preparations were completed the ambassadors were introduced. The Indian chiefs, accustomed for a long period to Spanish luxury, entered without testifying the slightest surprise. They bowed with dignity to the assembly, and, crossing their arms on their chests, waited till they were addressed by the General.

"What reason can have been so powerful as to oblige my sons to come and see me?" he asked, in a gracious and conciliating tone. "Let them make their request, and, if I can do so, I shall be most ready to satisfy it."

This opening, which the Governor fancied to be very politic, was, on the contrary, most awkward, as it offended the pride of those he addressed, and whom he had the greatest interest in humoring. Unicorn took a step forward. A sarcastic smile played on his lips, and he replied in a voice slightly tinged with irony:

"The Comanches do not come here to ask a favor. They know how to avenge themselves when insulted."

"What do my sons want, then?"

"To treat with my father for the ransom of the white chiefs who are in their power. Five pale-faces inhabit the cabin of the Comanches. The young men of the tribe demand their punishment, for the blood of the pale-faces is agreeable to the Master of Life. To-morrow the prisoners will have ceased to live if my father does not buy them off to-day. What does my father say? Shall we fasten our prisoners to the stake of blood, or restore them to liberty?"

"What ransom do you ask?" the General said.

"Listen, all you chiefs of the pale-faces here present, and judge of the clemency and generosity of the Comanches. We only wish, for the life of these five men, the life of two men."

"That is little, I allow," the General remarked; "and who are the two men whose lives you ask?"

"The pale-faces call them, the first, Don Miguel Zarate; the second, General Ibanez." The General started.

"Those two men can not be delivered to you," he answered; "they are condemned to death, and will die to-morrow."

"Good! My prisoners will be tortured this night," the chief replied, stoically.

"Confound it!" the General sharply exclaimed, "is there no other arrangement possible? Let my brothers ask me a thing I can grant them, and—"

"Enough! We will retire," Unicorn said, haughtily. "Longer discourse is needless: our deeds shall speak for us."

"A moment!" the General exclaimed. "All may be yet arranged. An affair like the present can not be settled all in a hurry: we must reflect on the propositions made to us. My son is a chief, and will grant us reasonable time to offer him a reply."

Unicorn bent a suspicious glance on the Governor.

"My father has spoken wisely," he presently made answer. "To-morrow, at the twelfth hour, I will come for the final answer of the pale-faces. But my father will promise to me not to order the punishment of the prisoners till he has told me the decision he has come to."

"Be it so," the General answered. "But what will the Comanches do till then?"

"They will leave the town as they entered it, and bivouac on the plain."

"Agreed on."

"The Master of Life has heard my father's promise, if he breaks his word, and possesses a forked tongue, the blood shed will fall on his head."

The Comanche uttered these words with a significant tone that made the General tremble inwardly; then he bowed to the assembly, and left the hall with his companions. It was after this interview that Unicorn had the conversation with Valentine which we recently described.

Still, when the Mexican officers were alone with the General, their courage returned all at once, and they reproached him for the little dignity he had displayed before the Indians, and specially for the promise he had made them.

"The promise you allude to pledges me to nothing. Between this and to-morrow certain things will happen to free us from

the Comanches, and enable us to dispense with surrendering the prisoners they demand so insolently."

CHAPTER XXXV.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

ABOUT half a league west of Santa Fé three men and a woman were seated behind a dense clump of trees, which sheltered while rendering them unseen, over a brushwood fire, supping with good appetite, and chatting together. The three men were Red Cedar's sons; the female was Ellen.

"Hum!" Sutter said, "what can keep father so long? He told us that he should be back by four o'clock at the latest; but the sun is just disappearing on the horizon, and he has not come yet."

"I care very little," Sutter brusquely replied, "whether father is here or not; but I believe we should do well not to wait longer, but return to the camp, where our presence is doubtless necessary."

"Nonsense! Our comrades can do without us," Shaw observed. "If father has not returned by sunrise, we will go back to camp. Harry and Dick can keep good order till our return."

"Let us stay, then," Sutter remarked. "We shall only have to keep the fire up, and one of us will watch while the others sleep."

The three brothers rose. Sutter and Nathan collected a pile of dry wood to maintain the fire, while Shaw intertwined a few branches to make his sister a sufficient shelter for the night. The two elder brothers thrust their feet toward the fire, wrapped themselves in their blankets, and went to sleep, after advising Shaw to keep a bright look-out. Shaw, after stirring up the fire, threw himself at the foot of a large tree, and letting his head sink on his chest, plunged into deep and painful meditation.

His sister Ellen was the only member of his family for whom he experienced sympathy; and yet it was only with extreme reserve that he intrusted his boyish secrets to her—secrets which, during the last few days, had acquired an importance he did not himself suspect, but which his sister, with the innate intelligence of woman, had already divined.

Shaw, as we have said, was thinking. He was dreaming of Clara. He loved her, as he was capable of loving, with that passionate impetuosity, that violence of feeling, to which his uncultivated mind adapted him. The sight of the maiden caused him a strange trouble, which he did not attempt to account for. He did not try to analyze his feelings, for that would have been impossible; and yet at times he was a prey to cold and terrible fury, when thinking that the haughty maiden, who was even unconscious of his existence, would probably only spurn and despise him if she knew it. He was yielding to these crushing thoughts, when he suddenly felt a hand laid on his shoulder. On turning, Ellen stood before him, upright and motionless, like the white apparitions of the German legends. He raised his head, and bent an inquiring glance on his sister.

"What is the matter, Ellen?"

"Can you not guess?"

"I do not understand you."

"On the contrary, you understand me too well, Shaw," she said, with a sigh. "Your heart rejoices at this moment at the misfortune of the woman you should defend."

"What can I do?" he murmured, faintly; "the person of whom you speak is father's prisoner. I can not contend against him."

Ellen smiled, contemptuously. "You seek in vain to hide your thoughts from me," she said. "I read your heart as an open book: your sorrow is feigned, and you really rejoice at the thought that in future you will constantly be by Clara's side."

"I!" he exclaimed, with an angry start.

"Yes, you only see in her captivity a means to approach her. Your selfish heart is secretly gladdened by that hope."

"You are harsh to me, sister. Heaven is my witness that, were it possible, I would at once restore her the liberty torn from her."

"You can if you like."

"No, it is impossible. My father watches too closely over his prisoner."

"He will not distrust you, but allow you to approach her freely."

"But how save her?"

"That is your affair, Shaw."

"But father?" Shaw said, hesitatingly.

"He will not know your movements. I take on myself to prevent him noticing them."

"Good!" the young man remarked, half-convinced: "but I do not know where the maiden is hidden."

"I will tell you; Clara is confined at the

Rancho del Coyote: she was intrusted to Andres Garote."

"Ah, ah!" the young man said, as if speaking to himself, "I did not fancy her so near us."

"Good!" the maiden remarked. "Lose no time: my father's absence alarms me. Perhaps at this moment he is preparing a safer hiding-place for his prisoner."

"But who will keep watch while my brothers sleep?"

"I will," the maiden answered, resolutely.

"Whence arises the interest you feel in this woman, sister, as you do not know her?" the young man asked, in surprise.

"She is a woman, and unhappy. Are not those reasons sufficient?"

"Perhaps so," Shaw remarked doubtfully.

And rising hurriedly, he kissed his sister, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and ran off in the direction of Santa Fé. When he had disappeared in the gloom, and the sound of his footsteps had died out in the distance, the girl fell on the ground, muttering in a low, sad voice:

"Will he succeed?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

RED CEDAR did not remain long under the effect of the startling insult he had received. Pride, wrath, and, before all, the desire to avenge himself, restored his strength, and a few minutes after Don Pablo Zarate's departure the squatter had regained all his coolness and audacity.

"You see, senor padre," he said, addressing the monk, "that our little plans are known to our enemies: we must, therefore, make haste if we do not wish to see persons break in here, from whom it is of the utmost importance to conceal ourselves. Tomorrow night at the latest, perhaps before, we shall start. Do not stir from here till my return. Your face is too well known at Santa Fé for you to venture to show it in the streets without imprudence."

"Hum!" the monk muttered, "that demon, whom I fancied dead, is a rude adversary. Fortunately we shall soon have nothing more to fear from his father, for I hardly know how we should get out of it."

"If the son has escaped us," Red Cedar said with an ugly smile, "that is fortunately not the case with the father. Don't be alarmed: Don Miguel will cause us no further embarrassment."

"I wish it most earnestly, for he is a determined man; but I confess to you that I shall not be entirely at my ease till I have seen him fall beneath the bullets of the soldiers."

"You will not have long to wait. General Ventura has ordered me to go and meet the regiment of dragoons he expects, in order to hurry them on, and bring them into the town this very night, if possible. So soon as the Governor has an imposing force at his disposal he will no longer fear a revolt on the part of the troops, and give the order for execution without delay."

"May heaven grant it! But," he added with a sigh of regret, "what a pity that most of our scamps deserted us! We should have almost arrived at the place by this time, and been safe from the vengeance of our enemies."

"Patience, senor padre: all is for the best, perhaps. Trust to me, Andres, my horse."

"You will start at once, then?"

"Yes. I recommend you to watch carefully over our prisoner."

The monk shrugged his shoulders.

"Our affairs are tolerably well embarrassed already; then why burden ourselves with a woman?"

The squatter frowned.

"That is my business," he exclaimed in a peremptory tone. "Keep all stupid observations to yourself. A thousand devils! I know what I am about. That woman will possibly prove our safeguard at a later date."

And mounting his horse, Red Cedar galloped out of Santa Fé.

"Hum!" Andres Garote said, as he watched him depart, "what a diabolical eye! Though I have known him several years, I never saw him like that before. How will all this end?"

Without further remarks he arranged matters in the rancho, repairing as well as he could the disorder caused by the previous struggle; then he took a look round him. The monk sat with his elbows on the table, and a cigarette in his mouth.

"Why, senor padre," the ranchero said in an insinuating voice, "do you know that it is hardly five o'clock?"

"Do you think so?" the other answered for the sake of saying something.

"Does not the time seem to you to go very slowly?"

"Extraordinarily so."

"If you liked we could easily shorten it with these."

And Andres drew from his boot a pack of greasy cards, which he complacently spread out on the table.

"Ah! that is a good idea," the monk exclaimed with sparkling eyes. "Let us have a game of *monté*. If you permit me I will make you a proposal."

"Do so, senor."

"This it is: we will play, if you like, for the share of the gold we shall receive when we reach the placer."

"Done!" the ranchero shouted enthusiastically.

"Well," the monk said, drawing from his pocket a pack of cards no less dirty than the others, "we can at any rate kill time."

"What! you have cards too?" the ranchero remarked.

"Yes, and quite new, as you see."

Andres bowed with an air of conviction.

The game began at once, and soon the two men were completely absorbed.

Although Garote was a passed master in trickery, and displayed all his science, he found in the monk so skillful an adversary that, after more than three hours of an obstinate struggle, they both found themselves as little advanced as at the outset. The monk, however, on coming to the rancho, had an object which Red Cedar was far from suspecting.

Fray Ambrosio rested his arms on the table, bent his body slightly forward, and while carelessly playing with the cards, which he amused himself by sorting, he said to his companion, as he fixed a scrutinizing glance upon him:

"Shall we talk a little, Andres?"

"Willingly," the latter replied, who had partly risen, but now fell back on his chair. "Senor Don Andres," continued the monk, in an insinuating voice, "what a happiness that your poor brother, on dying, revealed to me the secret of the rich placer, which he concealed even from yourself!"

"It is true," Andres answered, turning slightly pale; "it was very fortunate. For my part, I congratulate myself on it daily."

"Is it not so? for without it the immense fortune would have been lost to you and all else."

"It is terrible to think of."

"Well, at this moment I have a horrible fear."

"What is it, father?"

"That we have deferred our departure too long, and that some of those European vagabonds we were speaking of just now may have discovered our placer. Those scoundrels have a peculiar scent for finding gold."

"Father!" Andres said, striking the table with feigned grief (for he knew well what the monk was saying was only a clever way of attaining his real point,) "that would drive me mad—an affair so well managed hitherto."

"That is true," Fray Ambrosio said in corroboration. "I could never console myself."

"I have as great an interest in it as yourself, father," the gold-seeker replied, with coolness.

Andres Garote was a man of unequalled bravery, gifted with a fertile and ready mind, whom the accidents of life had compelled to live for a lengthened period on the prairies, whose paths he knew as thoroughly as he did the tricks of those who dwelt on them. Hence, and for many other reasons, Andres Garote was an invaluable comrade for Fray Ambrosio.

"However," said the monk, after an instant's reflection, "supposing that the placer is intact, and that no one has discovered it, we shall have a long journey to reach it."

"Yes," the ranchero remarked, significantly; "the road is difficult and broadcast with perils innumerable."

"We must march with our chins on our shoulders, and fingers on the rifle-trigger."

"Fight nearly constantly with wild beasts or Indians—"

"In a word, do you not believe that the woman Red Cedar has carried off will prove a horrid bore?"

"Dreadfully so," Andres answered.

"Is she here?"

"Yes," the gold-seeker said, pointing to a door: "in that room."

"Suppose we restore her to her family?"

"And they pay a proper ransom."

"That is what I meant to say."

There was a silence.

"But who is to undertake this delicate mission?" asked the monk.

"I," the ranchero exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with greed at the thought of the rich ransom he would demand.

"But if Red Cedar were to find out," the monk remarked, "that we had surrendered his prisoner?"

"Who will tell him?"

"I am sure I shan't."

"Nor I."

"It is very easy; the girl will have escaped."

"Quite true."

"Do not let us lose time, then."

"Don Pablo will be delighted to recover his sister, whom he expected never to see again, and will not haggle over the price he pays for her deliverance."

Andres Garote rose with a smile which would have caused the monk to reflect, had he seen it; but at the same moment the latter was rubbing his hands, saying in a low voice, and with a most satisfied air:

"Now, my scamp, I've got you."

What secret thought possessed these two men, who were carrying on a mutual deceit, none save themselves could have said. The gold-seeker approached the door of the room where Clara was confined, and put the key in the lock. At this moment two vigorous blows were dealt on the outer door, which had been carefully bolted. The two accomplices started.

"Must I open?" Andres asked.

"Yes," the monk answered; "hesitation or refusal might create alarm."

Andres went to open the door, which the new-comer threatened to break in. A man walked in, who took a careful glance around, then doffed his hat, and bowed. The confederates exchanged a glance of vexation on recognizing him, for he was no other than Shaw, Red Cedar's youngest son.

"I am afraid I disturb you, gentlemen," the young man said, with an ironical smile.

"Not at all," Andres made answer; "on the contrary, we are delighted to see you."

"Thanks!"

And the young man fell back into a chair.

"You are very late at Santa Fé," the monk remarked.

"It is true," Shaw said, with some embarrassment; "I am looking for my father, and fancied I should find him here."

"He was so a few hours back, but was obliged to leave us."

"Ah!"

The monk and the miner did not at all understand Shaw's conduct, and lost themselves in conjectures as to the reasons that brought him to town. They guessed instinctively that what he said about his father was only a pretext or means of introduction; and that a powerful motive, he would not or dare not avow, had brought him. For his part, the young man, in coming where he knew that Clara was imprisoned, expected to find Andres alone, with whom he hoped to come to an understanding in some way or another. The presence of the monk disturbed all his plans. Still, time was slipping away; he must make up his mind, and, before all, profit by Red Cedar's providential absence, which offered him an opportunity he could hardly dare to hope again.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A STORMY DISCUSSION.

SHAW was not timid, as we have said—he ought rather to be accused of the opposite excess; he was not the man, once his resolution was formed, to let any thing soever turn him from it. His hesitation was not long; he suddenly rose, and violently stamping his rifle-butt on the ground, looked at the two men, while saying in a firm voice:

"Be frank; my presence here at this hour astonishes you, and you ask yourselves what cause can have brought me. I will tell you: I have come to deliver Dona Clara."

"What do I hear?" said Fray Ambrosio.

"Hum!" the young man continued, quickly, "believe me, do not attempt any useless resistance, for I have resolved, if needs must, to pass over your bodies to success."

"Pardon me," the monk interrupted, "such a determination on your part naturally surprises us."

"Why so?" the young man said, raising his head haughtily.

"Because," Fray Ambrosio answered, tranquilly, "you are the son of Red Cedar, and it is at least strange that—"

"Enough talking," Shaw exclaimed, violently; "will you or not give up her I have come to seek?"

"I must know, in the first place, what you intend doing with her."

"How does that concern you?"

"More than you imagine. Since that girl has been a prisoner I constituted myself—if not her guardian, for the dress I wear forbids that—her defender; in that quality I have the right of knowing for what reason you, the son of the man who tore her from her family, have come so audaciously to demand her surrender to you, and what your object is in acting thus?"

The young man had listened to these remarks with an impatience that became mo-

mentarily more visible; it could be seen that he made superhuman efforts to restrain himself. When the monk stopped, he looked at him for a moment with a strange expression, then walked up so close as almost to touch him, drew a pair of pistols from his girdle and pointed them at the monk.

"Surrender Clara to me," he said, in a low and menacing voice.

Fray Ambrosio had attentively followed all the squatter's movements, and when the latter put the pistol-muzzles to his chest, the monk, with an action rapid as lightning, also drew two pistols from his girdle, and placed them on his adversary's chest. There was a moment of supreme expectation, of indescribable agony; the two men were motionless, face to face, panting, each with his fingers on a trigger, pale, and their brows dank with cold perspiration. Andres Garote, his lips curled by an ironical smile, and his arms crossed, carelessly leaned against a table, watching this scene which had for him all the attraction of a play.

All at once the door of the rancho, which had not been fastened again after the squatter's entry, was violently thrown back and a man appeared; it was Father Seraphin. At a glance he judged the position and boldly threw himself between the foemen, hurling them back, but not uttering a word. The two men recoiled, and lowered their weapons, but continued to menace each other with their glances.

"What!" the missionary said, in a deep voice, "have I arrived just in time to prevent a double murder, gentlemen? In heaven's name, hide those homicidal weapons; do not stand opposite each other like wild beasts preparing for a leap."

"I wish to save a young girl from his hands," Shaw said, "and restore her to her father."

"Of whom are you speaking, my friend?" the missionary asked, with a secret beating of his heart.

"Of whom should I speak, save Dona Clara Zarate, whom these villains retain here by force?"

"Can it be possible?" Father Seraphin exclaimed, in amazement. "Clara here?"

"Ask those men," Shaw answered, roughly, as he angrily struck the butt of his rifle against the ground.

"Is it true?" the priest inquired.

"It is," the gold-seeker answered.

Father Seraphin frowned, and his pale forehead flushed.

"Sir," he said, in a voice choking with indignation, "I summon you, in the name of that God whom you serve, and whose minister you lay claim to being, to restore at once to liberty the hapless girl whom you have so unworthily imprisoned, in defiance of all laws, human and divine. I engage to deliver her into the hands of those who bewail her loss."

Fray Ambrosio bowed; he let his eyes fall, and said, in a hypocritical voice:

"Father, you are mistaken as regards myself. I had nothing to do with the carrying off of that poor child, which, on the contrary, I opposed to the utmost of my power; and that is so true, father," he added, "that at the moment when this young madman arrived, the worthy miner and myself had resolved, at all risks, on restoring her to her family."

"I should wish to believe you, sir; if I am mistaken, as you say, you will forgive me, for appearances were against you; it only depends on yourself to produce a perfect justification by carrying out my wishes."

"You shall be satisfied, father," the monk replied. At a signal from him Garote left the room. During the few words interchanged between the two men, Shaw remained motionless, hesitating, not knowing what he ought to do; but he suddenly made up his mind, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and turned to the missionary.

"Father," he said, respectfully, "my presence is now needless here. Farewell; my departure will prove to you the purity of my intentions."

And turning suddenly on his heel, he hurried out of the rancho. A few moments after his departure the gold-seeker returned, Clara following him.

She no longer wore the dress of the whites, for Red Cedar, in order to render her unrecognizable, had compelled her to don the Indian garb, which the maiden wore with an innate grace that heightened its strange elegance. On seeing the missionary, Clara uttered a cry of joy, and rushing toward him, fell into his arms, and murmured in a heartrending voice:

"Father! save me! save me!"

"Be calm, my daughter!" the priest said to her, gently. "You have nothing more to fear, now that I am near you."

"You see, father," Fray Ambrosio said, hypocritically, "that I did not deceive you."

The missionary cast at the monk a glance of undelivable meaning.

"I trust that you spoke truly," he replied; "the God who gauges hearts will judge you according to works."

And picking up a cloak, he placed it delicately on the shuddering shoulders of Clara, in order to conceal her Indian garb. Father Seraphin drew her arm through his own, and led her from the rancho. Ere long they disappeared in the darkness. Fray Ambrosio looked after them as long as he could see them, and then re-entered the room, carefully bolting the door after him.

"Well," Andres Garote asked him, "what do you think of all that has happened?"

"Perhaps things are better as they are."

"And Red Cedar?"

"I undertake to render ourselves as white in his sight as snow."

"Hum! it will be difficult."

"Perhaps so."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MYSTERY.

On leaving the Rancho del Coyote, Red Cedar dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, and galloped in a south-western direction. So soon as he was out of the town he turned to the left, took a narrow path that ran round the walls, pulled up his horse, and advanced with the utmost caution. Throwing suspicious glances on either side, he went on thus for about three-quarters of an hour, when he reached a house, in one of the windows of which burned three wax-tapers.

The lights thus arranged were evidently a signal for the squatter, for soon as he came to the house he stopped and dismounted, attached his horse to a larch-tree, and prudently concealing himself behind a thicket, imitated thrice at equal intervals the hu-hu of an owl. The lights burning in the window were extinguished, as if by enchantment.

At this moment a voice could be heard from the house which Red Cedar was watching so carefully. The squatter listened; the speaker leaned for a second out of the window, looked cautiously round, and disappeared muttering loud enough for the squatter to overhear:

"You can come on, for you are expected."

"I know it; hence here I am."

While making this answer, Red Cedar left his hiding-place, and placed himself before the door with folded arms, like a man who has nothing to fear. The door was cautiously opened; a man emerged, carefully wrapped up in a wide cloak, which only allowed eyes to be seen, that flashed in the gloom like a jackal's. This person walked straight up to Red Cedar.

"Well," he asked, in a low voice, "have you reflected?"

"Yes."

"And what is the result of your reflections?"

"I refuse."

"Take care."

"I do not care, Don Melchior, for I am not afraid of you."

"No names!" the stranger exclaimed, impatiently.

"We are alone."

"No one is ever alone in the desert."

"That is true," Red Cedar muttered.

"Listen," the stranger said, in a low, cutting voice. "I will lose no more of my time. Hand Dona Clara over to me, and I will give you the papers which—"

"Enough!" the squatter said, sharply.

"Have you those papers about you?"

"No, I have not. I am not such a fool as to risk assassination at your hands."

"What would your death profit me?"

"Hang it all, if it were only my scalp you would be sure to receive at least fifty dollars for it."

At this mournful jest the squatter began laughing.

"I did not think of that," he said. "Hang it, though, what can be your motive for wishing to have this girl in your power?"

"That is no affair of yours. I have no explanations due to you. Enough for you to know that I want her."

"You shall not have her."

"We shall see. Good-by, Red Cedar."

"Good-by, Don Melchior, or whatever be the name you please to bear."

The stranger made no reply, but turned his head with a gesture of contempt, and whistled. A man emerged from the house, holding a horse by the bridle; at one bound the stranger reached the saddle, and ordered the servant to withdraw.

"Farewell, *Compadre*, remember our appointment."

And loosing his reins, the stranger started at a gallop, not condescending even to turn his head. Red Cedar looked after him with an indescribable expression of rage.

"Oh," he muttered, in a low voice, "demon! shall I never free myself from your clutches?"

And with a motion rapid as thought he shouldered his rifle, and aimed at the departing man. All at once the latter turned his horse, and stood right opposite Red Cedar.

"Mind not to miss me!" he cried, with a burst of laughter, that caused a cold perspiration to bead on the bandit's forehead.

The latter let his rifle fall, saying, in a hollow voice:

"He is right, and I am mad! If I only had the papers!"

The stranger waited for a moment, calm and motionless; then he started again, and soon disappeared in the darkness. Red Cedar stood with his body bowed forward, and his ears on the watch, so long as the horse's hoofs could be heard; then he returned to his own steed, and bounded into the saddle.

"Now to go and warn the dragoons," he said, and pushed on.

The squatter had scarce departed ere several men appeared from either side; they were Valentine, Curumilla, and Don Pablo on the right; Unicorn and Eagle-wing on the left. Valentine and his friends were astonished at meeting the Comanche chief, whom they believed gone back to his camp; but the sachein explained to them, in a few words, how, at the moment he was crossing the spot where they now were, he had heard Red Cedar's voice, and concealed himself in the shrubs in order to overhear the squatter's colloquy with his strange friend. Valentine had done the same; but unfortunately, the party had been greatly disappointed, for the squatter's conversation remained to them an enigma, of which they sought the key in vain.

"Tis strange," Valentine remarked, as he passed his hand several times across his forehead. "I do not know where I have seen the man just now talking here with Red Cedar, but I have a vague reminiscence of having met him before, where and under what circumstances I try, though in vain, to recall."

"What shall we do?" Don Pablo asked.

"Hang it, what we agreed on;" and turning to the chief he said, "Good luck, brother, I believe we shall save our friend."

"I am sure of it," the Indian replied, laconically.

"May heaven hear you, brother," Valentine continued. "Act! while, on your side, you watch the town for fear of treason. We then will ambush ourselves on the road the gold-seeker must take, in order to know positively the direction in which they are proceeding. Till to-morrow, chief!"

"Stop!" a panting voice exclaimed, and a man suddenly appeared in the midst of them.

"Father Seraphin!" Valentine said, in surprise. "What chance brings you this way?"

"I was looking for you."

"What do you want with me?"

"To give you some good news."

"Speak! speak quickly, father! Has Don Miguel left his prison?"

"Alas! not yet; but his daughter is free!"

"Dona Clara free!" Valentine shouted, joyously. "Heaven be blessed! where is she?"

"She is temporarily in safety, be assured of that; but let me give you a warning, which may perhaps prove useful to you."

"Speak! speak!"

"By order of the Governor, Red Cedar has gone to meet the regiment of dragoons, coming up to reinforce the Santa Fe garrison."

"Are you sure of your statement, father?"

"I am; in my presence, the men who carried off Dona Clara spoke about it."

"All is lost if these soldiers arrive."

"Yes," the missionary said; "but, how to prevent it?"

Curumilla lightly touched the leader's arm.

"What do you want, chief?"

"The Comanches are warriors," Curumilla answered, curtly.

"Ah!" Valentine exclaimed, and tapping his forehead with delight, "that is true, chief; you save us."

"While you go in pursuit of the soldiers," said Don Pablo, "as I can be of no service to you, I will accompany Father Seraphin to my poor sister."

"Do so," Valentine answered. "At day-break you will bring Clara to the camp, that I may myself deliver her to her father."

"That is agreed."

Valentine, Curumilla, and Unicorn rushed out in the plain, while Father Seraphin and Don Pablo returned to the town. The two latter, anxious to join the girl, did not perceive that they were closely watched by an individual, who followed their every movement, while careful not to be seen by them. It was Nathan, Red Cedar's eldest son.

How was that man there?

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE AMBUSCADE.

The night-breeze had swept the clouds away; the sky, of a deep azure, was studded with an infinity of stars; the night was limpid, the atmosphere so transparent as to allow the slightest varieties of the landscape to be distinguished. About four leagues from Santa Fé, a numerous band of horsemen was following a path scarcely traced in the tall grass, which approached the town with countless turns and windings. These horsemen, who marched in rather decent order, were nearly eight hundred in number, and formed the regiment of dragoons so anxiously expected by General Ventura.

About ten paces ahead rode four or five officers gayly chatting together, among whom was the colonel. The regiment continued its march slowly, advancing cautiously, through fear of losing its way in a perfectly strange country. The colonel and his officers who had always fought in the States bordering the Atlantic, found themselves now for the first time in these savage countries.

The colonel suddenly remarked, "I confess to you that I am completely ignorant as to our whereabouts. Can any one of you throw a light on the subject? This road is fearful; it seems to lead nowhere, and I am afraid we have lost our way."

"We are all as ignorant as yourself on that head, colonel," an officer answered; "not one of us could say where we are."

"Give the order to halt."

The officer immediately obeyed; the soldiers, wearied with a long night's march, greeted with shouts of joy the order to stop. They dismounted. The horses were unsaddled and picketed, camp-fires were lighted, and in less than an hour the bivouac was arranged.

The colonel, in desiring to camp for the night, had a more serious fear than that of losing his way; it was that of falling in with a party of *Indios bravos*. On the other hand, he was unaware that the Governor of Santa Fé had such pressing need of his presence, and this authorized him in acting with the utmost precaution. Still, so soon as the bivouac was established, and the sentinels posted, the colonel sent off a dozen resolute men under a sergeant, to trot up the country and try to procure the assistance of a guide.

The little squad had started at a gallop, but it soon reduced its pace, and the soldiers and sergeant began laughing and talking, caring little for the important mission with which they were intrusted. A majestic silence hovered over the plain, only disturbed at intervals by those sounds, without any known cause, which are heard on the savannas, and which seem to be the respiration of the sleeping world. Suddenly the mocking-bird sung twice, and its plaintive and soft song resounded melodiously through the air.

"Hullo," one of the dragoons said, addressing his comrade, "that's a bird that sings very late."

"An evil omen," the other said with a shake of his head.

At this moment the song, which appeared previously some distance off, could be heard much more close, and seemed to come from some trees on the side of the path the dragoons were following. The sergeant raised his head and stopped; but all became silent again, so he shook his head and continued his conversation. The detachment had been out more than an hour. During this long stroll, the soldiers had discovered nothing suspicious. The officer was about to give orders to return to camp, when one of the troopers pointed out to him some heavy, black forms, apparently prowling about unsuspiciously.

"What on earth can that be?" the officer asked, after carefully examining what was pointed out to him.

"*Caspita*," one of the dragoons exclaimed, "that is easy to see; they are browsing deer!"

"Deer!" said the sergeant, in whom the hunter's instinct was suddenly aroused, "there are at least thirty; suppose we try to lasso them."

The dragoons, delighted at the opportunity of indulging in their favorite sport, dismounted, fastened their horses to the roadside trees and seized their lassos. On arriving at a short distance from the game, the dragoons separated in order to have room for whirling their lassos, and making a covering of each tree, they managed to approach within fifteen paces of the animals.

A strange thing happened at this moment, however. All the deer-hides fell simultaneously to the ground, displaying Valentine, Curumilla, and a dozen Comanche warriors, who, profiting by the stupor of the troopers at their extraordinary metamorphosis, hunted the hunters by throwing lassos over

their shoulders and hurled them to the ground. The ten dragoons and their leader were prisoners.

"Well, my friends," Valentine said with a grin, "how do you like that sort of fun?"

The startled dragoons made no reply, but allowed themselves to be bound: one alone muttered between his teeth:

"I was sure that villain of a mocking-bird would bring us ill-luck; it sung on our left. That never deceives, *Canarios*!"

Valentine smiled at this sally. He then placed two fingers in his mouth and imitated the cry of the mocking-bird with such perfection, that the soldier looked up at the trees. He had scarce ended, when a rustling was heard among the bushes, and a man leaped between the hunters and their prisoners. It was Eagle-wing, the sachem of the Coras.

CHAPTER XL.

A FRIENDLY DISCUSSION.

AFTER leaving his enemy (for the mysterious man with whom he had so stormy a discussion could be nothing else), Red Cedar set out to join the regiment, and hasten its arrival according to the orders he had received. In spite of himself, the squatter was suffering from extraordinary nervousness. Whatever might be the reason, it was a very potent one; for after a few minutes of deep thought, his hands let go the reins and his head fell on his breast: at length he raised it and shouted, as he directed a savage glance at the starlit sky, "Any struggle with that demon is impossible. I must fly, so soon as practicable, to the prairies of the far west. General Ventura must seek another emissary, for more important matters claim my attention. I must go to the Rancho del Coyote, for there alone shall I find my revenge. Fray Ambrosio and his prisoner can supply me with the weapons I need for the terrible contest I am compelled to wage against that demon."

After having uttered these words in a low voice, in the fashion of men wont to live in solitude, Red Cedar appeared to regain all his boldness and energy. He looked savagely around, and, burying his spurs in his horse's flanks, he started with the speed of an arrow in the direction of the rancho.

The monk and the gambusino, delighted at the unexpected termination of the scene we recently narrated, delighted above all at having got rid of Dona Clara without being immediately mixed up in her escape, tranquilly resumed their game of *monte*. In the midst of a most interesting game, they heard the furious gallop of a horse up the paved street. Instinctively they stopped and listened: a secret foreboding seemed to warn them that this horse was coming to the rancho, and that its rider wanted them.

In truth, neither Fray Ambrosio nor Andres Garote had a quiet conscience, even supposing, which was very doubtful, that either had a conscience at all, for they felt that they were responsible to Red Cedar for Dona Clara.

The horse stopped short before the rancho; a man dismounted, and the door shook beneath the tremendous blows of his fists.

"Hum!" Andres whispered, as he blew out the solitary candle that illumined the room. "Who the deuce can come at this advanced hour of the night? I have a great mind not to open."

Strange to say, Fray Ambrosio had apparently regained all his serenity. With a smiling face, crossed arms, and back leaned against the wall, he seemed to be a perfect stranger to what perplexed his mate so furiously. At Garote's remark an ironical smile played round his pale lips for a second, and he replied with the most perfect indifference:

"You are at liberty to act as you please, still I think it my duty to warn you of one thing."

"What is it?"

"That, if you do not open your door, the man, whoever he may be, now battering it, is very capable of breaking it in, which would be a decided nuisance for you."

"You speak very much at your ease," the gambusino answered, ill-temperedly. "Suppose it be Red Cedar?"

"The greater reason to open the door. If you hesitate, he will begin to suspect you; and then take care, for he is a man capable of killing you like a dog."

"Will you open?" a rough voice shouted.

"Red Cedar!" both men whispered.

"I am coming," Andres replied, in a voice which terror caused to tremble.

He rose unwillingly, and walked slowly toward the door, which the squatter threatened to tear from its hinges.

"Make haste!" he howled, "for I am in a hurry."

"Hum! it is surely he!" the gambusino thought. "Who are you?" he asked.

"What! who am I?" Red Cedar exclaimed, bounding with wrath. "Did you not recognize me, or are you having a game with me?"

"I never have a game with any one," Andres replied, imperturbably; "but I warn you that, although I fancy I recognize your voice, I shall not open till you mention your name. The night is too far advanced for me to risk receiving a suspicious person into my house."

"I will break the door down."

"Try it," the gambusino shouted boldly, "and by our Lady of Pilar I will send a bullet through your head."

At this threat the squatter rushed against the door in incredible fury, with the evident intention of breaking it in; but, contrary to his expectations, though it creaked and groaned on its hinges, it did not give way. Andres Garote had indulged in a line of reasoning which was far from being illogical, and revealed a profound knowledge of the human heart. He had said to himself, that, as he must face Red Cedar's anger, it would be better to let it reach its paroxysm at once, so as to have only the decreasing period to endure. He smiled at the squatter's sterile attempts, then, and repeated his request.

"Well, then," the other said, furiously, "I am Red Cedar. Do you recognize me now?"

"Of course; I see that I can open without danger."

And the ranchero hurriedly drew back the bolts. Red Cedar rushed into the room with a yell of fury, but Andres had put out the light. The squatter stopped, surprised by the gloom which prevented him distinguishing any object.

"Hullo!" he said. "What is the meaning of this darkness? I can see nothing."

"*Caspita*!" Andres replied, impudently, "do you think I amuse myself o' nights by watching the moon? I was asleep, when you came to arouse me with your infernal hammering."

"That is possible," the squatter remarked; "but there was no reason for keeping me so long at your door."

"Prudence is the mother of security. We must not let every comer into the rancho."

"Hum!" the squatter snorted, suspiciously; light the candle."

Andres struck a match, and Red Cedar looked eagerly round the room; but Fray Ambrosio had disappeared.

"Where is the monk?" Red Cedar asked.

"I do not know: probably gone."

The squatter shook his head.

"All this is not clear," he muttered; "there is treachery behind it."

"That is possible," Andres answered, calmly.

Red Cedar bent on Andres eyes that flashed with fury, and roughly seized him by the throat.

"Answer, scoundrel!" he shouted.

"What has become of Dona Clara?"

"I do not know."

The squatters squeezed more tightly.

"You do not know!" he yelled.

"No!" Andres whined, "I tell you I do not know."

"Malediction!" Red Cedar went on. "I will kill you, if you are obstinate."

"Let that man go, and I will tell you all you wish to know," was said in a firm voice by a hunter, who at this moment appeared on the threshold.

The two men turned in amazement.

"Nathan!" Red Cedar shouted on recognizing his son. "What are you doing here?"

"I will tell you, father," the young man said, as he entered the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

NATHAN.

NATHAN was not asleep, as Ellen supposed, when she urged on Shaw to devote himself to liberate Clara, and he had listened attentively to the conversation. Since the fatal night, when the chief of the Coras had avenged himself for the burning of his village and the murder of its inhabitants, Nathan's character had grown still more gloomy; he had sworn in his heart to avenge on those who fell into his hands the injury one man had inflicted on him; in a word, Nathan loved none and hated every thing.

When Shaw had disappeared among the bushes, and Ellen, after taking a final glance around to convince herself that all was in order, re-entered the hut that served her as a shelter, Nathan rose cautiously, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and rushed after his brother.

Convinced of the importance of the affair, and knowing the value his father attached to carrying off the maiden, who was a most precious hostage for him, Nathan did not lose a moment, but bounded with the agility of a tiger-cat over the obstacles that beset his path. Presently, he reached an isolated house, not far from which several men were conversing together in a low voice. Nathan stopped and listened; he recognized well-known men, and his mind was at once made up.

He laid himself on the ground, and advanced, inch by inch, crawling like a serpent. At length he reached a clump of Peru trees only a few yards distant from the spot where the men were standing. His expectations were not deceived; though a few words escaped him here and there, he was near enough perfectly to catch the sense of the conference. A sinister smile lit up his face, and he eagerly clenched the barrel of his rifle.

Presently the party broke into two. Valentine, Curumilla, and Unicorn, took the road leading to the country, while Don Pablo and Father Seraphin returned toward Santa Fé.

So soon as they were gone, Nathan drew two or three deep breaths, and started in pursuit of Don Pablo and the missionary, with whom he soon caught up.

They walked quickly, like persons anxious to reach a place where they know they are expected, exchanging but a few words at intervals, whose meaning, however, caught up by the man who followed them, urged him still more not to let them out of sight. They thus traversed the greater part of the town, until reaching their destination—a house of handsome aspect.

A weak light burned at the window of a ground-floor room. By an instinctive movement, the two men turned round at the moment of entering the house, but Nathan had slipped into a doorway, and they did not perceive him. Father Seraphin tapped gently; the door was at once opened, and they went in. Nathan stationed himself in the middle of the street, with his eyes ardently fixed on the only window of the house lit up. Ere long, shadows crossed the curtains.

"Good!" the young man muttered; "but how to warn the old one that the dove is in her nest?"

All at once, a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and Nathan turned, fiercely clutching a bowie-knife. A man was before him, gloomy, silent, and wrapped in the thick folds of his cloak.

"Go your way," he said, in a menacing voice.

"Nonsense, you are mad; the road belongs to all. This place suits me, and I shall remain."

"I wish to be alone here."

"You mean to kill me, then?"

"If I must, yes, without hesitation."

The two speakers had exchanged these words in a low and hurried voice, in less time than we have employed to write them. They stood but a few paces apart, with flashing eyes, ready to rush on each other. "So be it," said Nathan, drawing a knife from his boot.

"Then your blood will be on your own head."

"Or on yours," Nathan replied.

The two foemen each fell back a pace, and stood on guard, their cloaks rolled round their left arms. The moon, veiled by clouds, shed no light; midnight struck from the cathedral. Suddenly Nathan uttered a hoarse yell, rushed on his enemy, and threw his cloak in his face, to put him off his guard. The stranger parried the stroke dealt him, and replied by another, warded off with equal dexterity. The two men then seized each other round the waist, and wrestled for some minutes, without uttering a word; at length the stranger rolled on the ground with a heavy sigh; Nathan's knife was buried in his chest. He rose with a yell of triumph—his enemy was motionless.

"Can I have killed him?" he muttered.

He returned his knife to his boot, and bent over the wounded man. All at once he started back, for he had recognized his brother Shaw.

"What is to be done now?" he said; but then added carelessly, "Pshaw! all the worse for him. Why did he come across my path? Well, heaven knows, I ought not, and could not have hesitated."

Shaw lay to all appearance dead, with pale and drawn cheeks, in the center of the street.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE WOUNDED MAN.

Nathan proceeded straight to the Rancho del Coyote where his unexpected ar-

rival was a blessing for Andres Garote, whom the old squatter was treating very roughly. On hearing his son's words, Red Cedar let go of the gambusino, who tottered back against the wall.

"Well," he said, "where is Dona Clara?"

"Come with me, father," the young man answered; "I will lead you to her."

"You know her hiding-place, then?"

"Yes."

"And so do I," Fray Ambrosio shouted, as he rushed into the room with discomposited features; "I felt sure I should discover her."

Red Cedar looked at him in amazement, but the monk did not wince.

"What has happened to her?" the squatter said, presently, as he looked suspiciously from the monk to the gambusino.

"A very simple matter," Fray Ambrosio answered, with an inimitably truthful accent; about two hours back your son Shaw came here."

"Go on."

"Very good. He presented himself to us as coming from you to remove our prisoner."

"And what did you do?" the squatter asked, impatiently.

"What could we do?"

"Why, oppose the girl's departure."

"Do you fancy we let her go so?" the monk asked, imperturbably.

The squatter looked at him in surprise—he no longer understood any thing. Like all men of action, discussion was to him almost a matter of impossibility: especially with an adversary so crafty as the one he had before him. Deceived by the monk's coolness and the apparent frankness of his answers, he wished to make an end of it.

"Come," he said, "how did all this finish?"

"Thanks to an ally who came to your son's help, and to whom we were obliged to bow—"

"An ally! What man can be so bold as to dare—"

"Eh!" the monk sharply interrupted Red Cedar, "that man is a priest, to whom you have already bowed many a time."

"You are jesting," the squatter exclaimed savagely.

"Not the least in the world. Had it been any one else, I should have resisted; but I, too, belong to the Church; and as Father Seraphin is my superior, I was forced to obey him."

"What!" the squatter said, with a groan, "is he not dead?"

"It appears," the monk remarked, ironically, "as if those you kill are all in a good state of health, Red Cedar."

At this allusion to Don Pablo's death, the squatter stifled a cry of anger, clenched his fists, and said: "If I do not always kill, I know how to take my revenge. Where is Dona Clara at this moment?"

"In a house no great distance from here," Nathan answered.

"Good!" said Red Cedar; "as the dove is in her nest, we shall be able to find her. What o'clock is it?"

"Three in the morning," Andres interjected. "Day will soon break."

"We must make haste, then. Follow me, all of you. Then he added, "But what has become of Shaw? Does any one of you know?"

"You will probably find him at the door of Clara's house," Nathan said, in a hollow voice.

"How so? Has my son entered into a compact with my enemies?"

"Yes; as he arranged with them to carry off your prisoner."

"Oh! I will kill him if he prove a traitor!" the squatter shouted with an accent that made the blood run cold in the veins of his hearers.

"That is done," Nathan said, harshly. "Shaw tried to stab me, so I killed him."

After these mournful words, there was a moment of silence in the rancho. All these men, though their hearts were steeled by crime, shuddered involuntarily. The squatter passed his hand over his dark brow. A sigh, like a howl, painfully forced its way from his oppressed chest.

"He was my last born," he said, in a voice broken by an emotion which he could not control. "He deserved death, but he ought not to have received it at his brother's hands."

"Father!" Nathan muttered.

"Silence!" Red Cedar shouted, in a hollow voice, as he stamped his foot passionately on the ground; "what is done can not be undone; but, woe to my enemy's family!"

After uttering these words, he said to his mates, in a hollow voice:

"Let us be off! We have wasted too much time here already!"

And he left the rancho, the others following close at his heels.

In the meanwhile Don Pablo and Father

Seraphin were with Clara. The priest had taken the maiden to the house of an honest family which owed him great obligations, and was too happy to receive the poor sufferer.

Dona Clara had been placed in a comfortable room by her hosts. The maiden, worn out by the poignant emotions of the scene she had witnessed, was on the point of retiring to bed, when Father Seraphin and Don Pablo tapped at the door of her room. She hastily opened it, and the sight of her brother, whom she had not hoped to see so speedily, overwhelmed her with joy.

An hour soon slipped away in pleasant chat. Don Pablo was careful not to tell his sister of the misfortune that had befallen their father. Then, as the night was advancing, the two men withdrew, so as to allow her to enjoy that rest so needed to strengthen her for the journey home. Father Seraphin offered Don Pablo to pass the night with him by sharing the small lodging he had not far from there, and the young man eagerly accepted. After a leave-taking, they, therefore, left the house, and, so soon as they were gone, Clara threw herself, ready dressed, into a hammock hanging at one end of the room, when she speedily fell asleep.

On reaching the street, Don Pablo saw a body lying motionless in front of the house.

"What is this?" he asked, in surprise.

"A poor wretch whom robbers have killed in order to plunder him," the missionary answered.

"That is possible."

"Perhaps he is not quite dead," the missionary went on; "it is our duty to succor him."

"As you please," Don Pablo said, as he followed him.

Shaw, for it was he, gave no signs of life. The missionary examined him, then rose hastily, seized Don Pablo's arm, and drew him to him, as he whispered:

"Look!"

"Shaw!" the Mexican exclaimed, in surprise; "what could that man be doing here?"

"Help me, and we shall learn. The poor fellow has only fainted; and the loss of blood has produced this semblance to death."

Don Pablo, greatly perplexed by this singular meeting, obeyed the missionary, without further remark. The two men raised the wounded lad, and carried him gently to Father Seraphin's lodging, where they proposed to give him all the help his condition required.

They had scarce turned the corner of the street, when several men appeared at the other extremity. They were Red Cedar and his confederates. On arriving in front of the house they stopped: all the windows were in the deepest obscurity.

"Which is the girl's room?" the squatter asked in a whisper.

"This one," Nathan said, as he pointed to it.

Red Cedar crawled up to the house, drove his dagger into the wall, raised himself to the window, and placed his face against a pane.

"All is well! she sleeps!" he said, when he came down. "You, Fray Ambrosio, to one corner of the street; you, Garote, to the other; and do not let me be surprised."

The monk and the miner went to their allotted posts. When Red Cedar was alone with his son he bent and whispered in his ear:

"What did you do with your brother?"

"I left him on the spot where he fell."

"Where was that?"

"Just where we now stand."

The squatter stooped down to the ground, and walked a few steps, carefully examining the bloody traces left on the pebbles.

"He has been carried off," he said, when he rose again. "Perhaps he is not dead."

Then, they prepared to escalate the window.

CHAPTER XLIII.

INDIAN DIPLOMACY.

We will return, for the present, to Valentine and his comrades.

The sudden apparition of the sachem of the Coras had produced a certain degree of emotion among the hunters and the Comanches. Valentine, the first to recover from his surprise, addressed Eagle-wing.

"My brother is welcome," he said, as he held out his hand, which the Indian warmly pressed. "What news does the chief bring us?"

"Good," the Coras answered laconically.

"My brother can speak," Valentine continued; "he is surrounded by none but friends."

"I know it," the chief answered, as he bowed gracefully to the company. "Since I left my brother two months have passed

away: I have worn out many moccasins amid the thorns and brambles of the desert: I have been beyond the Great Lakes to the villages of my nation."

"Good; my brother is a chief; he was doubtless well received by the sachems of the Coras of the Great Lakes."

"Mookapee is a renowned warrior among his people," the Indian answered proudly; "his place by the council-fire of the nation is pointed out. The chiefs saw him with joy."

The hunter's comrades had drawn nearer, and now formed a circle round the two speakers. Curumilla was occupied silently, as was his wont, in completely stripping each Spanish prisoner, whom he then bound in such a way that the slightest movement was impossible.

Valentine, although time pressed, knew too well the Red-skin character to try and hurry Eagle-wing on. He felt certain that the chief had important news to communicate to him; but it would have been no use trying to draw it from him; hence he allowed him to act as he pleased. Unicorn, leaning on his rifle, listened attentively, without evincing the slightest impatience.

"Go on, chief," Valentine said.

"They assembled in council to hear the words of Eagle-wing," the Coras continued. "They shuddered with fury on hearing of the massacre of their children; but Mookapee had formed his plan, and two hundred warriors are assembled beneath his totem."

"Good!" said Valentine, "the chief will avenge himself."

The Indian smiled.

"Yes," he said, "my young men have their orders, they know what I mean to do."

"Very good! in that case they are near here?"

"No," the chief replied, with a shake of his head. "Eagle-wing does not march with them; he has hidden himself under the skin of an Apache dog."

"What does my brother say?" Valentine asked, with amazement.

"My white brother is quick; his nation is great," Unicorn interposed; "it does not need to march along hidden paths. The poor Indians are weak as the beaver, but like him they are very cunning."

"That is true," Valentine replied; "cunning must be allowed you in dealing with the implacable enemies who surround you. I was wrong; so go on, chief; tell us what deviling you have invented, and if it is ingenious—well, I will be the first to applaud it."

"Wah, my brother shall judge. Red Cedar is about to enter the desert, as my brother doubtless knows?"

"Yes."

"Does my brother know that he has asked the Apaches for a guide?"

"No, I did not."

"Good. Stanapat, the great chief of the Apaches, sent a Navajoe warrior to act as guide to Red Cedar."

"Well?"

"The Navajoe was scalped by Eagle-wing."

"Ah, ah! then Red Cedar can not set out?"

"Eagle-wing takes the place of the guide."

"Hum?" Valentine remarked, with some show of ill-humor. "It is possible, but you play for a heavy stake, chief. That old villain is as crafty as ten monkeys and ten opossums united. I warn you that he will recognize you."

"My brother can be easy. Eagle-wing is a warrior; he will see the white hunter again in the desert."

"I wish so, chief; but I doubt. However, act as you please. When will you join Red Cedar?"

"This night."

"You are going to leave us?"

"At once. Eagle-wing has nothing more to confide to his brother."

And, after bowing courteously to the company, the Coras chief glided into the thicket, in which he disappeared almost instantaneously. Valentine looked after him for some time.

"Yes," he said at last, with a thoughtful air, "his project is a daring one, such as might be expected from so great a warrior. May Heaven protect him, and allow him to succeed!"

And turning to Curumilla, "The clothes?" he said.

"Here they are," the Aucas answered, laconically, as he pointed to an enormous heap of clothing.

"What does my brother mean to do with them?" Unicorn asked.

"My brother will see," Valentine said, with a smile; "each of us is going to put on one of these uniforms."

The Comanche drew himself up haughtily.

"No," he said, "Unicorn does not put off the dress of his people. What need have we of this disguise?"

"In order to enter the camp of the Spaniards without being discovered."

"The hunter will act rightly. But Unicorn is a chief, he can not put on the clothes of the pale-faces."

Valentine no longer insisted, as it would have been unavailing; so he agreed to modify his plan. He made each of his comrades put on a dragoon uniform, and himself donned the clothes stripped from the sergeant. When the metamorphosis was as complete as possible, he turned to Unicorn.

"The chief will remain here," he said, "to guard the prisoners."

"Good," the Comanche answered. "Is Unicorn, then, a chattering old woman, that warriors place him on one side?"

"My brother does not understand me. I do not wish to insult him, but he can not enter the camp with us."

The chief shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"The Comanche warriors can crawl as well as serpents. Unicorn will enter."

"Let my brother come, then, since he wishes it."

"Unicorn is a sachem; he must give an example to his young men on the war-path."

Valentine gave a nod of assent.

"Here are the horses of the pale-faces," Curumilla said; "my brother will need them."

"That is true," the hunter answered, with a smile; "my brother is a great chief, he thinks of every thing."

Every one mounted, Unicorn alone remained on foot. Valentine placed the sergeant by his side.

He said to him: "You will act as our guide to the camp. We do not wish to take the lives of your countrymen; our intention is simply to prevent them following us at present. Pay attention to my words; if you attempt to deceive us, I blow out your brains. You are warned."

The Spaniard bowed, but made no reply. As for the prisoners, they had been so conscientiously tied by Curumilla, that there was no chance of their escaping. The little band then set out, Unicorn disappearing among the trees. When they came a short distance from the bivouac, a sentry challenged, "Who goes there?"

"Answer," Valentine whispered to the sergeant.

He did so. They passed, and the sentry, suddenly seized by Curumilla, was bound and gagged in the twinkling of an eye, all the other sentinels sharing the same fate. The Mexicans keep up a very bad watch in the field, even in the presence of an enemy. Everybody was asleep, and Valentine and his friends were masters of the camp. The regiment of dragoons had been surprised without striking a blow.

Valentine's comrades dismounted; they knew exactly how to act, and did not deviate from the instructions given by their leader. They proceeded from picket to picket, removing the horses, which were led out of camp. Within twenty minutes all had been carried off. When they had finished, Valentine raised the curtain of the colonel's tent, and found himself face to face with Unicorn, from whose waist-belt hung a reeking scalp. Valentine could not repress a movement of horror.

"What have you done, chief?" he asked, reproachfully.

"Unicorn has killed his enemy," the Comanche replied, peremptorily. "When the leader of the antelopes is killed, his flock disperses; the gachupinos will do the same."

Valentine drew near the colonel. The unhappy man, fearfully mutilated, with his brain laid bare, lay stark dead in a pool of blood, in the middle of the tent. The hunter vented a sigh at this sorry sight.

Taking away his sabre and epaulettes, he left the tent, followed by the Indian chief, and rejoined his comrades. The horses were led to the Comanche camp, after which Valentine and his party wrapped themselves in their blankets, and slept calmly till day-break. The dragoons were no longer to be feared.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE STRANGER.

FATHER SERAPHIN and Don Pablo we left bearing the wounded man to the missionary's lodging. Although the house to which they were proceeding was but a short distance off, yet the two gentlemen, compelled to take every precaution, employed considerable time on the journey. Nearly every step they were compelled to halt, so as not to fatigue too greatly the wounded man, whose inert limbs swayed in every direction.

"That man is dead," Don Pablo remarked, during a halt.

"I fear so," the missionary answered, sadly; "still, as we are not certain of it, our conscience bids us to bestow our care on him, until we acquire the painful conviction that it avails him naught."

"I will do what you wish, father. You have entire power over me. Still, I fear that all our care will be thrown away."

"God, whose humble instruments we are, will prove you wrong, I hope. Come, a little courage; a few paces further, and we shall have arrived."

Father Seraphin lodged at a house of modest appearance, in a small room he hired from a poor widow. This room only received air from a window opening on an inner yard, and was a perfect conventual cell, as far as furniture was concerned, for the latter consisted of a wooden frame, over which a bull-hide was stretched, and served as the missionary's bed. But, like all cells, this room was marvelously clean. From a few nails hung the well-worn clothes of the poor priest, and a shelf supported vials and flasks which doubtless contained medicaments; for, like all the missionaries, Father Seraphin had a rudimentary knowledge of medicine, and took in charge both the souls and bodies of his neophytes.

The father lit a candle of yellow tallow standing in an iron candlestick, and aided by Don Pablo, laid the wounded man on his own bed; after which the young man fell back into a chair to regain his breath. Father Seraphin, on whom, spite of his fragile appearance, the fatigue had produced no apparent effect, then went down stairs to lock the street-door, which he had left open. As he pushed it to, he felt an opposition outside, and a man soon entered the yard.

"Pardon, my reverend sir," the stranger said; "but be kind enough not to leave me outside."

"Do you live in this house?"

"No," the stranger coolly replied, "I do not live in Santa Fé, where I am quite unknown."

"Do you ask hospitality of me, then?" Father Seraphin continued, much surprised at this answer.

"Not at all, reverend sir."

"Then what do you want?" the missionary said, still more surprised.

"I wish to follow you to the room where you have laid the wounded man, to whose aid you came so generously a short time back."

"This request, sir—" the priest said, hesitating.

"Has nothing that need surprise you. I have the greatest interest in seeing with my own eyes in what state that man is, for certain reasons which in no way concerns you."

"Do you know who he is?"

"I do."

"Are you a relation or friend of his?"

"Neither one nor the other. Still, I repeat to you, very weighty reasons compel me to see him and speak with him, if that be possible."

Father Seraphin took a searching glance at the speaker. He was a man of great height, apparently in the fullest vigor of life. His features, so far as it was possible to distinguish them by the pale and tremulous moonbeams, were handsome, though an expression of unbending will was the marked thing about them. He wore the rich dress of a Mexican, and had in his right hand a magnificently inlaid American rifle. Still the missionary hesitated.

"Well," the stranger continued, "have you made up your mind?"

"Sir," Father Seraphin answered with firmness, "do not take in ill part what I am going to say to you."

The stranger bowed.

"I do not know who you are; you present yourself to me in the depths of the night, under singular circumstances. You insist, with strange tenacity, on seeing the poor man whom Christian charity compelled me to pick up. Prudence demands that I should refuse to let you see him."

A certain annoyance was depicted on the stranger's features.

"You are right," he answered; "appearances are against me. Unfortunately, the explanation you demand from me justly would make us lose too much precious time, hence I can not give them to you at this moment. All I can do is to swear, in the face of Heaven, on that crucifix you wear round your neck, and which is the symbol of our redemption, that I only wish well to the man you have housed, and that I am this moment seeking to punish a great criminal."

The stranger uttered these words with such frankness, and such an air of sincerity, his face glistened with so much honesty, that the missionary felt convinced: he took up the crucifix and offered it to this extraordinary man.

"Swear," he said.
 "I swear it," he replied in a firm voice.
 "Good," the priest went on; "now you can enter, sir; you are one of ourselves; I will not even insult you by asking your name."

"My name would teach you nothing, father," the stranger said sadly.
 "Follow me, sir."

The missionary locked the gate and led the stranger to his room, on entering which the new-comer took off his hat reverently, took a position in a corner of the room, and did not stir.

"Do not trouble yourself about me," he said in a whisper, "and put implicit faith in the oath I took."

The missionary only replied by a nod, and as the wounded man gave no sign of life, but still lay much in the position he was first placed in, Father Seraphin walked up to him. For a long time, however, the attention he lavished on him proved sterile, and seemed to produce no effect on the squatter's son. Still, the father did not despair, although Don Pablo shook his head. An hour thus passed, and no ostensible change had taken place in the young man's condition; the missionary had exhausted all his stock of knowledge, and began to fear the worst. At this moment the stranger walked up to him.

He said touching him gently on the arm, "you have done all that was humanely possible, but have not succeeded."

"Alas! no!" the missionary said, sadly.

"Will you permit me to try in my turn?"

"Do you fancy that you will prove more successful than I?" the priest asked in surprise.

"I hope so," the stranger said softly.

"Still, you see I have tried every thing that the medical art prescribes in such a case."

"That is true; but the Indians possess certain secrets known only to themselves, and which are of great efficacy."

"I have heard so. But do you know these secrets?"

"Some of them have been revealed to me: I will try their effects on this young man, who, as far as I can judge, is in a desperate condition."

"I fear he is, poor fellow."

The stranger bent over the young man, and regarded him for a moment with fixed attention; then he drew from his pocket a flask of carved crystal, filled with a fluid as green as emerald. With the point of his dagger he slightly opened the wounded man's closed teeth, and poured into his mouth four or five drops of the fluid contained in the flask. A strange thing then occurred; the young man gave vent to a deep sigh, opened his eyes several times, and suddenly, as if moved by supernatural force, he sat up and looked around him with amazement. Don Pablo and the missionary were almost inclined to believe in a miracle, so extraordinary did this appear to them. The stranger returned to his dark corner. Suddenly the young man passed his hand over his dank forehead, and muttered in a hollow voice:

"Ellen, my sister, it is too late. I can not save her. See, see, they are carrying her off; she is lost!"

And he fell back on the bed, as the three men rushed toward him.

"He sleeps!" the missionary said in amazement.

"He is saved!" the stranger answered.

"What did he want to say, though?" Don Pablo inquired anxiously.

"Did you not understand it?" the stranger asked him.

"No; did you?"

"Yes; that lad wished to deliver your sister!"

"It is true. Go on."

"He was stabbed at the door of the house where she sought shelter."

"What next?"

"Those who stabbed him wished to get him out of the way, in order to carry her off a second time."

"Ah!" Don Pablo exclaimed in despair, "my father—let us fly to my sister's aid!"

The two men rushed from the house with a presentiment of misfortune. When the stranger found himself alone with the wounded man, he walked up to him, wrapped him in his cloak, threw him over his shoulders as easy as if he were only a child, and went out in his turn. On reaching the street, he carefully closed the door, and went off at a great rate, soon disappearing in the darkness. At the same instant the melancholy voice of the watchman could be heard chanting the hour of four.

CHAPTER XLV.

GENERAL VENTURA.

It was about six in the morning. A dazzling sun poured down his transparent rays on the streets of Santa Fé, which were already full of noise and movement at that early hour of the morning. General Ventura was still plunged in a deep sleep, reassured by the speedy arrival of the dragoons promised him, and fancying he had nothing more to fear from the Comanche, who, on the previous day, had so audaciously bearded him in the very heart of his palace.

Suddenly the door of the sleeping room in which the worthy Governor reposed, was torn violently open, and an officer entered. General Ventura, aroused with a start, sat up in his bed, fixing on the importunate visitor a glance, at first stern, but which at once became uneasy on seeing the alarm depicted on the officer's features.

"What is the matter, Senor Captain Don Lopez?"

Captain Lopez was a soldier of fortune, who had grown gray in harness, and contracted a species of rough frankness, that prevented him toning the truth down under any circumstances, which fact made him appear in the General's eyes, a bird of very evil omen. To the General's query the captain only returned the following three storm-laden words:

"Nothing that's good."

"What do you mean?"

"There is a soldier outside who has just come from I don't know where, and who insists on speaking with you. Shall I bring him, or send him about his business?"

"One moment," exclaimed the General, whose features had suddenly become gloomy; "who is the soldier?"

"A dragoon, I fancy."

"A dragoon! let him come in at once. May Heaven bless you, with all your circumlocution! The man, doubtless, brings me news of the arrival of the regiment I am expecting, and which should have been here before. Let him come in."

"That is true," said the captain, as he went off.

During this conversation the General had leaped from his bed, and dressed himself with the promptness peculiar to soldiers.

All at once a great noise was heard in the Plaza Mayor. The General went to a window, pulled aside a curtain, and looked out.

"The Indians again!" he said; "how can they dare to present themselves here? They must be ignorant of the arrival of the dragoons. Such boldness is incomprehensible."

He let the curtain fall, and turned away. The soldier whom the captain had announced stood before him, waiting the General's pleasure to question him. The General started on perceiving him. He was pale; his uniform was torn and stained with mud as if he had made a long journey on foot through brambles. The General wished to clear up his doubts; but, just as he was opening his mouth to ask the man a question, the door flew back, and several officers, among whom was Captain Don Lopez, entered the room.

"General," the captain said, "make haste! You are expected in the council-hall. The Indians have come for the answer you promised to give them this morning. We have not a moment to lose, if we wish to avoid heavy disasters."

The General started.

"Gentlemen," he said in an ill-assured voice, "it is our duty to watch over the safety of the population. I follow you."

And taking no further heed of the soldier he had ordered to be sent in, he proceeded toward the council-hall.

The disorder that prevailed without had at length gained the interior of the palace. Nothing was heard but shrieks or exclamations of anger or terror. The Mexican officers assembled in the hall were tumultuously discussing the measures to be adopted in order to save a contest and the town. The entrance of the Governor produced a healthy effect upon them, in so far that the discussion suddenly ceased, and calmness was restored.

General Ventura regretted in his heart having counted on imaginary help, and not having listened to the sensible advice of some of his officers, who urged him the previous day to satisfy the Indians by giving them what they asked. In spite of the terror he felt, however, his pride revolted at being compelled to treat on equal terms with barbarians, and accept harsh conditions which they would doubtless impose on him, in the consciousness of having the upper hand.

When every one had given his opinion, the Governor rose, and said in a trembling voice:

"Caballeros, all of us here are men of courage, and have displayed that quality in

many difficult circumstances. Certainly, if the only thing was to sacrifice our lives to save the hapless townsmen, we would not hesitate to do so, for we are too well imbued with the soundness of our duty to hesitate; but, unhappily, that sacrifice would not avail to save those whom we wish before all to protect. Let us treat, then, with the barbarians, as we can not conquer them. Perhaps in this way we shall succeed in protecting our wives and children from the danger that menaces them. In acting thus, under the grave circumstances in which we find ourselves, we shall at least have the consolation of having done our duty, even if we do not obtain all we desire."

Hearty applause greeted this harangue, and the Governor, turning to the porter, who stood motionless at the door, gave orders to introduce the principal Indian chiefs.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE COMANCHES.

VALENTINE and his friends awoke at day-break. The Comanches were already prepared to start; and Unicorn, dressed in his great war costume, presented himself to the hunter.

"Is my brother going?" Valentine asked him.

"Yes," the sachem answered. "I am returning to receive the answer of the chief of the pale-faces."

"What is my brother's intention, should his demand be rejected?"

"They would not dare," Unicorn said, haughtily. "If the chief, whom my brother loves, is not delivered to me safe and sound, the Spanish prisoners shall be tortured on the plaza of Santa Fé, the town burned and sacked. I have spoken."

In the mean time the Comanche warriors had formed their ranks, and only awaited the signal of the sachem to start. The Spanish prisoners taken during the night were placed in the center, bound and half-naked. Suddenly a disturbance was heard in the camp, and two men rushed panting toward the spot where stood Valentine, the sachem, and Curumilla. They were Don Pablo and Father Seraphin. On reaching their friends, they fell, almost in a fainting state, on the ground. Valentine felt strangely alarmed.

"Heaven be praised!" he exclaimed; "but what is the matter, father? What misfortune have you to announce to me?"

"Dona Clara—"

"Well!" the hunter said, sharply.

"Was captured again last night by Red Cedar, and torn from the refuge where I placed her."

"Oh!" Valentine exclaimed, with concentrated fury, as he stamped his foot, "always that demon—that accursed Red Cedar. My curses on him! But, take courage, father; let us first save Don Miguel, and then I swear to you that I will restore his daughter to him."

Unicorn advanced.

"Master of prayer," he said to Father Seraphin, in a soft and impressive voice, "your heart is good. The Comanches love you. Unicorn will help you. Pray to your God. He will protect us in our researches, since he is, as you say, so powerful."

Then the chief turned to Don Pablo, and laid his hand firmly on his shoulder:

"Women weep," he said; "men avenge themselves. Has not my brother his rifle?"

On feeling the Comanche's hand laid on him, Don Pablo drew himself up, and fixed his eyes on the chief, and said, in a broken voice:

"Yes, you are right, chief. I am a man, and will avenge myself."

"Good. My brother speaks well; he is a warrior."

Don Pablo, crushed for a moment, had regained all his energy.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To Santa Fé, to deliver your father."

"I will go with you."

"Come," said Unicorn.

"No," Valentine interposed, authoritatively. "Your place is not there, Don Pablo; leave the Comanche warriors to act as they please; they do not need your help to carry out their plans properly. Remain with me."

"Command me, my friend," the young man said, with resignation; "I have perfect confidence in your experience."

"Good. You are reasonable. Brother," he added, turning to the chief, "you can start. The sun is already high in the horizon; may heaven grant that you may succeed!"

Unicorn gave the signal for departure. The Comanches uttered their war-yell, and started at a quick pace.

Curumilla then rose, and wrapped himself in his buffalo-robe; Valentine watching him, inquiringly.

"Does my brother leave us?" he said.
 "Yes," the Araucano answered, curtly.
 "Where is my brother going?"
 "To look for the camp of Red Cedar's miners," the Indian replied, with a cunning smile.
 "Good," Valentine said. "My brother forgets nothing."

Curumilla bowed gracefully, and proceeded in the direction of the Paso, soon disappearing in the windings of the road. Valentine turned to his friends, and said:

"Tell me all about Dona Clara, being carried off again, for I must have the fullest details."

We will leave the three now conversing, and join the Comanches and Unicorn again.

When the Comanches reached the Plaza Mayor, opposite the palace, they halted. At an order from Unicorn, the prisoners were completely stripped of their clothing and placed some distance in front of the first rank of Indians, each of them having at his side a fully-armed Indian ready to massacre him mercilessly at the slightest sign from Unicorn. When the preparations were completed, the Spider, the chief who had already performed the duty of flag of truce, pranced up to the gate of the palace, and demanded speech with the Governor.

The officer of the guard, who was no other than Don Lopez, politely requested the Indian warrior to wait a few moments, and then proceeded in all haste to General Ventura. We have seen what took place, and, after a delay of nearly half an hour, Captain Don Lopez returned. After some preliminary explanations, he informed the Spider that the General, surrounded by his staff, was awaiting, in the hall of audience, the sachem of the nation and his three principal warriors.

The Spider communicated this answer to Unicorn, who gave a nod of assent, dismounted, and entered the palace.

CHAPTER XLVII.

NEGOTIATIONS.

WHEN Unicorn entered the council-chamber, preceded by Captain Lopez, and followed by three Indian chiefs, the deepest silence prevailed among the Spanish officers assembled to meet him. The Governor, seated in a chair placed in the center of the hall, was looking nervously round him. He answered by a nod the ceremonious bow of the Comanches. The sachem draped himself in his buffalo-robe, with majestic grace, drew his head up proudly, and walked toward General Ventura. On coming within four paces of the Governor, Unicorn stopped, crossed his arms on his chest, and took the word.

"I salute my father!" he said, in a loud and fierce voice. "I have come, as was agreed on yesterday, to fetch the answer he owes me."

"Chief," the General answered, in any thing but a firm voice, "your behavior naturally surprises me. To my knowledge the Spaniards are not at war with your nation; the whites have not done any thing of which you have a right to complain. For what reason do you come, then, against the sworn faith, and when nothing authorizes you, to invade a defenseless town, and interfere in matters that only concern ourselves?"

"My father does not answer my request," the chief said. "He is mistaken; we have a cause, the imprisonment of Don Miguel Zarate, who, himself an Indian, has never belied his origin. Hence, my father must no longer ask by what right I am here, for that is perfectly established. When I came here yesterday, my father gave me to understand that my propositions would be accepted, and the exchange of prisoners carried out."

"It is possible, chief," the General replied; "but with reflection, your propositions have appeared to me unacceptable."

"Wah!" the Indian said, though not testifying his surprise otherwise.

"Yes," the General continued, growing animated, "I should be ashamed to grant them, for I should have the appearance of only yielding to threats. No, it can not be. The two gentlemen you claim are guilty, and shall die; and if you venture to oppose the execution of the just sentence of the court, we will defend ourselves. Honor forbids me subscribing those disgraceful proposals which you did not fear to lay before me."

"Is it really honor that has dictated my father's answer?" the Indian asked, ironically. "I can but withdraw; but before doing so, I will give him news. The warriors whom my father expected to arrive to his aid this day have been dispersed by my young men, as the autumn breeze sweeps away the leaves. They will not come."

A murmur of surprise, a most terror, ran through the assembly. The sachem let the long folds of his buffalo-robe fall back, tore from his girdle the bleeding scalp that hung there, and threw it at the General's feet.

"That," he said, gloomily, "is the scalp of the man who commanded my father's warriors."

A shudder of terror ran round the room at the sight of the scalp; the General felt the small dose of courage that had still animated him oozing out.

"Chief," he exclaimed, in a trembling voice, "is it possible you have done that?"

"I have done it," the sachem answered, coldly. "Now, farewell. I am about to join my young men."

"A few moments longer, chief," the General said; "perhaps we are nearer an understanding than you suppose."

"Here is my last word," the Comanche said. "I insist on the two prisoners being handed over to me."

"They shall be."

"We shall see. My warriors and myself will remain on the square. If, within an hour, the pale-faces are not free, the prisoners I hold will be pitilessly massacred, and the town plundered. I have spoken."

Unicorn left the hall, mounted his horse again, and calmly awaited the fulfillment of the promise made him.

When the Indians had left the council-chamber, the Mexicans rose tumultuously, for each feared the execution of the chief's threats. When the Governor saw that his officers were as terrified as himself, he reassured his coolness.

"Caballeros," he said, "you have heard this man. Will you allow yourselves to be thus braved in the heart of the town by a handful of scoundrels? To arms, Caballeros, and let us die bravely."

This sudden warlike order seemed to his hearers so unusual, and before all so inopportune, that they pressed him to accept without delay the proposals dictated by the sachem.

This was all the Governor wanted. He had the minutes of the council at once drawn up, and when it was signed by all present, he put it in his pocket.

"As you insist," he said, "I will myself proceed to the prison, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, and have the doors opened for Don Miguel Zarate and General Ibanez."

The General, glad in his heart at having got out of the scrape so well, left the Cabillo, and walked across the square to the prison, which stood on the opposite side.

Don Miguel and General Ibanez, on this day, according to their word, had risen at sunrise, and then, with incredible coolness, began conversing on indifferent topics. Suddenly a great noise was heard in the prison; a clang of arms reached the prisoners' ears, and hurried footsteps approached the rooms in which they were confined. They listened.

A key creaked in the lock, and the door opened. The two prisoners fell back in surprise on seeing the General, who rushed into the cell, followed by two or three officers.

"What the deuce do you want here, Governor?" Ibanez exclaimed.

General Ventura raised his head, fixed on the prisoners eyes sparkling with joy, and said, in a panting voice:

"My friends, I would come myself to tell you that you are free."

The prisoners fell back in amazement.

"What!" General Ibanez exclaimed, "are you speaking seriously?"

Don Miguel attentively looked at the Governor, trying to read in his face the reasons of his conduct.

"Come away," the Governor said eagerly, "do not remain a moment longer in this pestilential den."

"Pardon me," Don Miguel said, coldly, "but, with your permission, we will remain a few moments longer in it."

"Why so?" General Ventura asked, opening his eyes to their fullest extent.

"The care of our honor does not permit us to accept a liberation which might stain it; hence, we shall not leave this prison until you have given us an explanation."

The Governor hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels; he had never before had to deal with such obstinate prisoners.

"Gentlemen," he said, with feigned admiration, "I understand what nobleness there is in your scruples, and am happy to see that I was not mistaken in the greatness of your character. I will lay no conditions on you; you are free, purely and simply. Here are the documents connected with your trial, the proofs produced against you; take them and destroy them, and accept my sincere apologies for all that has passed."

While saying this, the Governor drew from his breast an enormous bundle of papers,

which he offered Don Miguel. The latter declined them with an air of disgust; but, General Ibanez, less scrupulous, eagerly clutched them, looked through them, to see that the Governor was not deceiving him, and then threw them into the *braseiro*, standing in the middle of the room. In less than four minutes, all was consumed.

"One word more, by your leave," the hacendero remarked. "On leaving this prison, where are we to go?"

"Wherever you please, gentlemen. I do not even ask your word of honor to enter into no further conspiracy."

"Good, sir," Don Miguel said, holding out his hand to General Ventura, "your conduct affects me—thanks."

"Come, come," the Governor said, to hide his embarrassment on receiving this so ill-deserved praise.

The prisoners no longer hesitated to follow him.

In the meanwhile, the news of Don Miguel's deliverance had spread through the town with the rapidity of a train of gunpowder; windows and roofs were filled with men, women, and children, whose eyes, fixed on the prison, awaited the moment of Don Miguel's appearance. When he did so, tremendous shouts greeted him. Unicorn walked up to the Governor.

"My father has kept his promise," he said, gravely. "I will keep mine; the white prisoners are free; I depart."

The Governor listened to these words with a blush; the sachem returned to the head of his war-party, which rapidly retired.

On reaching the gate, General Ventura bowed courteously to the two gentlemen, and hurried into his palace.

"What do you think of all this?" the hacendero asked his friend.

"Hum!" General Ibanez muttered, "the Governor's conduct seems to me rather queer; but, no matter, we are free. I confess to you, my friend, that I should have no objection to go a little distance from this place, the air of which, despite General Ventura's protestations, appears to me remarkably unhealthy for us."

At this moment, and ere Don Miguel could answer, the General felt a slight touch on his shoulders; he turned, and saw Curumilla before him, with a smiling face. Don Miguel and the General suppressed a cry of joy at the sight of the grave and excellent Indian.

"Come!" he said to them, laconically.

They followed him. On reaching a small street near the square, and which was nearly deserted, Curumilla led them to a house before which he stopped.

"It is here," he said, as he tapped twice.

The door opened, and they entered a courtyard, in which were three ready-saddled horses, held by a groom, which they at once mounted.

"Thanks, brother," the hacendero said, warmly, as he pressed the chief's hand; "but how did you learn our deliverance?"

The Araucano smiled pleasantly.
 "Let us go," he said, making no other answer.

"Where to?" Don Miguel asked.

"To join Koutonepi."

The three men started at full speed. Ten minutes later they were out of the town, and galloping across the plain.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE MEETING.

On reaching a point where the trail they were following formed a species of fork, Curumilla stopped, and the two gentlemen imitated him.

"That is your road," the Araucano chief said. "At the end of that path you will see Koutonepi's bivouac fire. I must leave you here."

After uttering these words, Curumilla turned his horse and started, giving them a parting wave of the hand.

The two gentlemen went on for nearly half an hour without exchanging a syllable; but, just as they turned a corner in the path, they saw a horseman in front apparently waiting for them. The Mexicans examined him attentively, but a black velvet mask prevented them distinguishing his features. On coming within five yards of him, they stopped.

"I salute you, Don Miguel Zarate, and you, General Ibanez," the stranger said. "I am happy to see you out of the claws of that worthy General Ventura."

"Friend," Don Miguel made answer, "I thank you for the kind words you address to me, and which can only come from a friend's lips. I should be pleased if you would take off the mask that conceals your features, so that I may recognize you."

"Gentlemen, if I removed my mask you would be disappointed, for my features are unfamiliar to you. Do not be angry with me

for keeping it on; but, be assured I am your friend."

The two Mexicans bowed courteously, and the stranger went on.

"I knew that so soon as you were free you would hasten to join that worthy hunter Valentine. I placed myself here where you must infallibly pass, in order to make you a communication of the utmost importance, which interests you extremely."

"Speak, sir!" said Don Miguel. "I am anxious to learn the news of which you have condescended to be the bearer."

The stranger shook his head sadly, and there was a moment's silence. At length he spoke again.

"Two months have elapsed, Don Miguel, since, through the treachery of Red Cedar, you were arrested and made prisoner at the Paso del Norte. Many events of which you are ignorant have occurred since then. On the very night of your arrest, at the moment you laid down your arms, your daughter was carried off by Red Cedar."

"My daughter!" the hacendero exclaimed in anguish.

"Yes," the stranger continued; "and after long researches, a man, providentially aided by Father Seraphin, at length succeeded last night in taking Dona Clara from her abductors: but Red Cedar, advised by some extraordinary chance, entered the house where the maiden had sought shelter, and carried her off again."

"Oh! I will avenge myself on that man!" the hacendero shouted passionately.

"You will find your son and Father Seraphin with Valentine," added the man.

"Red Cedar intends to start this evening, at the head of a band of miners, to go into the deserts of the Rio Gila, in search of a placer, which his accomplice, Fray Ambrosio, has indicated to him. I know not with what design Red Cedar is taking your daughter with him into the desert."

"I will follow him, were it for a thousand leagues," Don Miguel said, resolutely. "Thanks to you for having instructed me so fully. But, whence comes the interest you take in me so gratuitously, since, as you say, I do not know you?"

"You shall learn at a later date, Don Miguel. Now, before I leave you, one last word—an earnest warning."

"I listen attentively."

"Do not tell any one—not even the French hunter, not even your son—of our meeting. When you reach the far west, if you see before you, at one of your bivouacs, a piece of mahogany bearing the impress of a horse's shoe, rise at midnight, and leave the camp, not letting any one see you. When you have gone one hundred paces in the tall grass, whistle thrice: a similar whistle will answer you, and then you will learn many things important for you to know, but which I can not tell you to-day. Farewell."

"Farewell. I will do what you tell me."

The stranger dug his spurs into his horse's sides and the animal started off as if impelled by a tornado.

"Who can that man be?" said Don Miguel.

"I know no more than you do," his friend answered, "but I assure you I will know if it be possible."

"What! do you intend to come with me?"

"If you will accept my services," the General said, gayly.

"Most heartily," Don Miguel answered, warmly.

"That is settled, then; and I swear we will deliver Dona Clara."

"May Heaven grant it," the hacendero said, sadly.

A quarter of an hour later the two friends reached the Trail-Hunter's bivouac.

Valentine had been warned, nearly an hour previously, by Unicorn, of the negotiations with the Governor of Santa Fe, and the immediate liberation of the prisoners. So soon as he noticed their approach he walked to meet them, followed by Don Pablo.

A few hours were spent, after the first greetings were over, in a conference, of which the poor child, so audaciously carried off, was the sole subject. Valentine drew up with his friends the plan of the campaign against Red Cedar, which was so daring that it would have made the most resolute men nervous; but the free adventurers who were about to carry it out, in no way feared the mysterious dangers of the desert which they were going to confront. Father Seraphin had taken leave of his friends and found Unicorn, with whom he wished to go to the Comanche villages, in the hope of spreading the light of the gospel there. Toward evening Curumilla arrived. Not uttering a word, he sat down by the fire, took his calumet from his girdle and began smoking. Valentine laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Well?" he said to him.

"Curumilla has seen them."

"Good; are they numerous?"

"Ten times the number of fingers on my two hands, and one more."

"Zounds!" Valentine exclaimed. "We shall have a tough job in that case. Do you know when they will start?"

"This evening, when the new moon rises."

"Ah, ah; I read their plan," the hunter said. "They intend crossing the ford of the Toro before day."

Curumilla bowed his head in affirmation.

"That is true," Valentine remarked; "once the ford is passed they will be in the desert, and have comparatively nothing to fear, or at least they suppose so. I must confess," he added, addressing his friends, "that Red Cedar is a remarkably clever scoundrel; nothing escapes him, but this time he has a tough adversary."

"What shall we do?" Don Miguel asked.

"Sleep," Valentine answered; "we have still several hours before us, so let us profit by them."

Curumilla had slipped away, but now returned, bringing with him two rifles, pistols, and knives.

"My brothers had no weapons," he said, as he laid his load before the Mexicans.

The latter thanked him heartily; for owing to the foresight of Curumilla, who thought of every thing, they could now enter the desert boldly. Two minutes later the five men were fast asleep, and we will take advantage of their slumber to return to Red Cedar, whom we left on the point of climbing through Dona Clara's window, while Fray Ambrosio and Andres Garote were watching at either end of the street.

At one bound the bandit was in the room, after breaking open the window with a blow of his fist. Clara, suddenly aroused, leaped from the bed, uttering fearful cries at the sight of the terrible apparition before her.

"Silence," Red Cedar said to her; "one cry more, and I kill you."

The bandit gagged the poor child with the cloak that lay on the bed, threw her over his shoulder, and clambered out of the window again. So soon as he put foot on the ground, he whistled lightly for his comrades to rejoin him, which they did immediately, and, still carrying his burden, he proceeded with them in the direction of the Rancho del Coyote.

During the walk, which was not a long one, the bandits did not meet a soul. Andres opened the door and lit a candle; the ruffians entered, and the door was carefully bolted again. Red Cedar carried Clara, who was in a half-fainting state, to her room, removed the gag and then returned to the bar.

"There," he said, with satisfaction, "that is all right; the sheep has returned to the fold. Now listen to my orders," he continued, "and try and carry them out to the letter; or if not, your roguish hides will bear the blame."

The three men bowed silently.

"You, Nathan," he went on, "will come with me; and you others, bear this carefully in mind:—Our enemies will never suppose that I have made such a mistake as to bring my prisoner back here; for that is so absurd, that the idea will never enter into their heads. To-morrow, so soon as the moon rises, you will make the girl put on an Indian dress, and come to me at the camp. Immediately after your arrival we shall start. Good-by till to-morrow."

"Till to-morrow," they answered.

The squatter and his son left the rancho. They walked for a long time, with slung rifle, not exchanging a word, but listening to the slightest noise and sounding the darkness with their tiger-cat eyes. All at once they heard the firm footfall of a man coming toward them. They cocked their rifles, ready for any emergency. A voice was then heard, though the person to whom it belonged was invisible.

"My brothers must not fire; they would kill a friend."

The words were Apache—a language well known to the squatters.

Red Cedar replied in the same dialect, "There are no friends in the shadow of the desert. My brother must get out of my path, or I will kill him like a coyote."

"Is it thus," the Indian continued, "that the 'man-eater' receives the guide whom Stanapat, the great chief of the Apaches, sends him? In that case, good-by. I will retire."

"One moment," the squatter said, sharply, as he lowered his rifle, and made his son a sign to follow his example. "I could not guess who you were. Advance without fear, and be welcome, brother, for I was anxiously expecting you."

The Indian stepped forward. He wore the costume and characteristic paint of the Apache warriors; in a word, he was so well disguised, that Valentine himself could not have recognized in him his friend, Eagle-wing, the Chief of the Coras, though it was

Red Cedar, delighted at the arrival of his guide, received him in the most affable manner. He had long been acquainted with Stanapat, the most ferocious warrior of all the Indian nations that traverse the immense regions of the Rio Gila. After several questions, which Eagle-wing answered without hesitation or once tripping, Red Cedar, convinced that he was really the man the Apache chief had promised to send him, dismissed all doubt, and conversed with him in the most friendly spirit.

"What is my brother's name?" he asked, in conclusion.

"The Heart of Stone!" Eagle-wing replied.

"Good!" the squatter said; "my brother has a grand name. He must be a renowned warrior in his tribe."

A short time after, the three men reached the camp of the miners, established in a formidable position on the top of a rock called the Black Mountain.

CHAPTER XLIX.

FORDING THE DEL NORTE.

THE squatter's two accomplices passed the day quietly in playing, on credit, at monte. No one came to disturb them, or cast an indiscreet glance into this infamous den. About nine in the evening, the moon rose magnificently on a deep blue sky, studded with brilliant stars.

"I fancy it is time to get ready," Fray Ambrosio said.

"You are right," answered Andres, as he hid his greasy cards in his boot, and proceeded to the room in which Clara was confined. She followed him out, weeping bitterly.

"Come, come," the ranchero said to her, "dry your tears; we do not mean you any harm."

The maiden made no response to this consolation; she allowed herself to be disguised unresistingly, but still continued to weep.

When the gambusino had completed the maiden's Indian toilet, he perfected the disguise by throwing a zarape over her shoulders. Dona Clara was placed on a horse; Andres and the monk also mounted, and they then started at a gallop in the direction of the Black Mountain.

Red Cedar had lost no time, and all was ready for departure. The new-comers did not even dismount, but so soon as they were sighted, the caravan, composed, as we have stated, of some hundred and twenty resolute men, after forming in Indian file, started in the direction of the prairies, having first prudently detached two scouts to watch the neighborhood.

Soon they reached the banks of the Del Norte, or Ford del Toro.

The miners managed to get across safely. The only persons left on the bank were Red Cedar, Eagle-wing, the guide, and Dona Clara.

"It is our turn now, Heart of Stone," the squatter said, addressing Eagle-wing; "you see that our men are in safety, and only await us to set out again."

"The squaw first," the Indian replied, laconically.

The maiden boldly made her horse enter the river, and the two men followed. Dona Clara's horse was not following the line traced by the ford, but was turning to the left, as if carried away by the current.

The squatter crossed without any accident, and reached the bank in safety.

The Coras sachem had urged his steed in pursuit of Dona Clara's, and both were following the same line down the stream, the former striving to catch up to the latter. Suddenly the Coras' horse gave a leap, while uttering a snort of pain, and began madly beating the water with its forelegs, while the river was tinged with blood around it. The chief, perceiving that his horse was mortally wounded, leaned over the side, ready to leap off. At this moment, a hideous face appeared flush with the water, and a hand was stretched out to grasp him. With that imperturbable coolness that never deserts the Indians, even under the most critical circumstances, the Coras seized his tomahawk, split his enemy's skull open, and glided into the river.

A formidable war-yell was at this moment heard from the forest, and shots were fired from both banks at once, illuminating the scene with their fugitive flashes. A score of red-skins rushed on the miners, and a fight commenced.

The combat was short; the red-skins, who were only a party of marauding Pawnees, disappeared as rapidly as they had come.

So soon as the Indians were routed, Red Cedar bent an eager glance up the river; on that side the struggle was also over, and Eagle-wing, mounted behind the young lady,

was guiding her horse to the bank, which it soon reached.

"Well?" the squatter asked.

"The Pawnees are cowardly coyotes," the Coras answered, pointing to the human scalp that hung from his girdle; "they fly like old women, so soon as they see the war-plumes of my nation."

"Good!" the squatter said, gleefully, "my brother is a great warrior; he has a friend."

The Coras bowed with a smile of indescribable meaning. His object was gained; he had acquired the confidence of the man he meant to destroy. Dona Clara, Ellen, and the squatter's wife were placed in the center of the caravan, and the band started again.

An hour later, a second party of horsemen also crossed the Del Norte. It was much less numerous than the first, as it consisted of only five men, but they were Valentine, Curumilla, Don Miguel, his son, and General Ibanez. The real struggle was about to commence: behind them they left the civilized world, to find themselves face to face on the desert with their enemies.

THE END.

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